

DECEMBER 2025 / JANUARY 2026

CHOICE

266
products
TESTED

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Espresso machines
Fridges and bar fridges
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Soundbars
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Gimme shelter

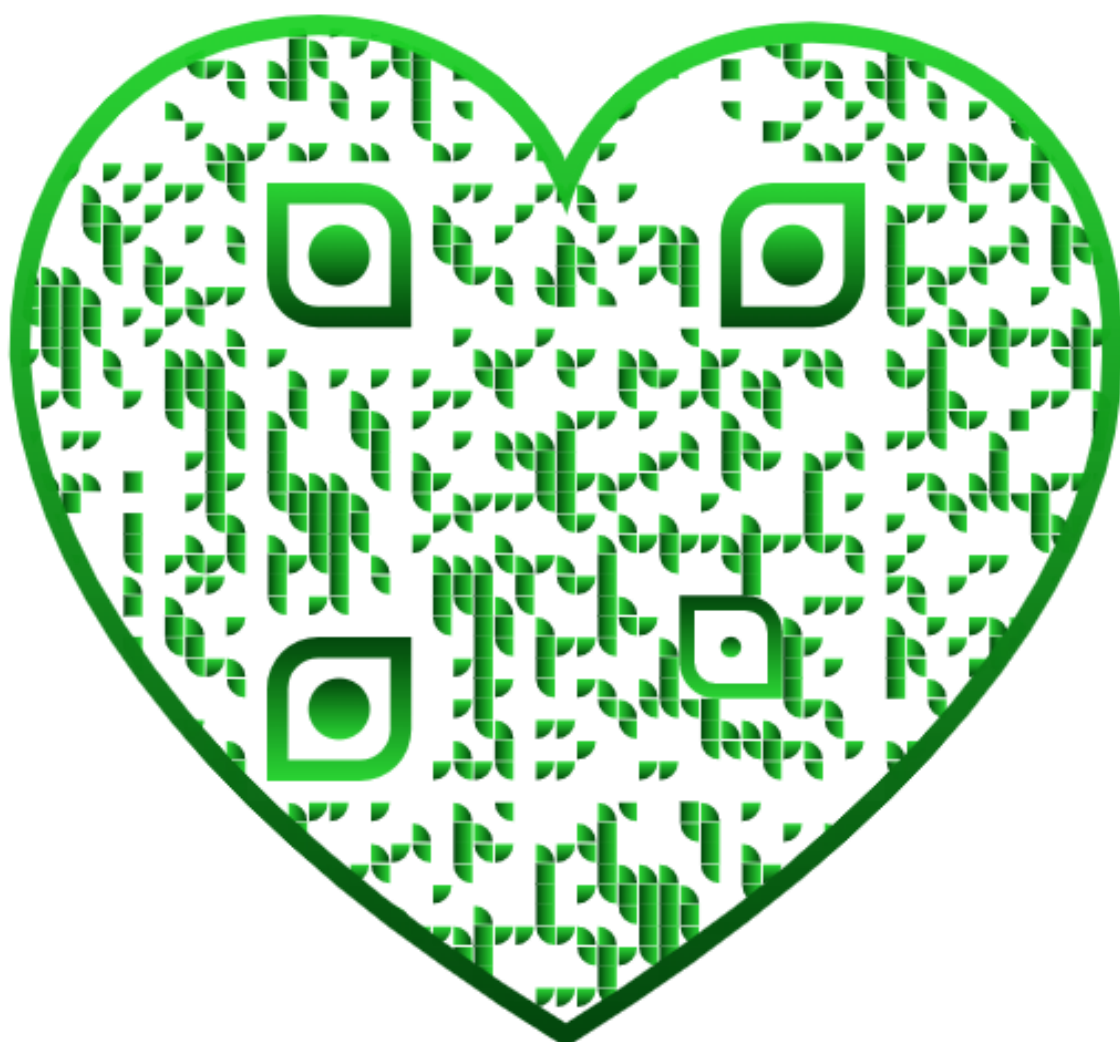
**Cabanas, tents & sails
for shady beach havens**

Solar power

A guide for beginners



Plus Best appliance brands, vanilla ice cream taste test & more



Slip, slop, slap

(And don't forget to seek and slide!)

Summer is awesome, we all know this. Me? I'm a big summer guy. The clocks change, the temps increase, the days stretch and I start thinking about beach trips, Christmas holidays, diving into my swimming pool and getting the barbecue fired up.

But this time it feels like summer is tinged with a mild anxiety. In short, I'm living in fear of my mortal enemy: The Sun. Because despite being a pale Scotsman, I've always been fairly lackadaisical about the impacts of UV rays. This has resulted in me getting regularly sunburnt in ways that scale from the hilarious to genuinely alarming.

Yes, you should continue to buy the sunscreens that are currently on the shelves

But now things have changed. Now I'm thinking a little bit more about how to protect myself and – more importantly – my kids from those blistering Australian summer rays.

Thanks to CHOICE sunscreen testing, in 2025 I've spent the majority of my professional life writing, talking and thinking about sun protection in ways that were previously alien to me. Until this year I didn't even know that "seek" and "slide" had been added to the legendary "slip, slop, slap"

awareness campaign launched by the Cancer Council back in the 80s.

This year, I'm locked in. I've bought myself a pair of sunglasses, which I absolutely intend to "slide" on throughout the summer. I'm far more inclined to "seek" shade, but also – I have zero intention of forgetting to "slip, slop, slap".

Ever since we published our sunscreen testing, the question I've been asked more than any other is: "can we trust sunscreens?". Despite the fact that many sunscreens on our test failed to meet their SPF claims, my answer is always the same: yes.

Yes, you should use the sunscreen you already have. Yes, you should

continue to buy the sunscreens that are currently on the shelves. Yes, you should trust and use sunscreen regularly because – crucially – even if a sunscreen has an SPF lower than advertised, it's still going to provide you with protection against the sun.

As many smart people have already pointed out, there's not too much of a difference between the protection of an SPF 50+ sunscreen and an SPF 30+ sunscreen. It's often the difference of single digit percentage



points. And, in actual fact, you're more likely to get sunburned because you didn't apply enough sunscreen, or you didn't apply it properly.

Australians absolutely deserve to get the sunscreen that they pay for, and we are committed to making sure folks in this sunburned country get the regulation they deserve. But in the meantime, this summer I am committed to lathering my pasty Scottish skin with all the sunscreen I can muster.

And don't forget the other types of sun protection that exist. We talk you through choosing a beach shelter on page 22.

We wish you a wonderful holiday, and from everyone at CHOICE, thank you for all your support in 2025.

Mark Serrels
CHOICE Editorial Director
Email: mserrels@choice.com.au

CHOICE

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the best goods and services, and avoid the worst. Wherever possible, we pay full price for the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising or freebies from industry. We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by membership. Membership includes access to product ratings across 200+ categories that are based on lab tests, expert assessments and

consumer surveys. We also research a wide range of consumer services, reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate their quality and claims.

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Our top picks for 2025

CHOICE magazine provides a selection of our top product reviews. We can't always include all the models we've tested, but you'll always find the products that scored the best. To view complete results for all our tests, go to choice.com.au, or call Customer Service on 1800 069 552 to add full online access to your membership package.

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news in brief
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Plan to outlaw supermarket price gouging

The federal government has put forward a proposal to make it illegal for big supermarkets to charge too much for groceries. The Treasury last month finished consulting on draft legislation that would hit large retailers with penalties for supplying products at “excessive prices”.

The government says a price could be deemed excessive if it was significantly and persistently above what a large retailer would be able to charge if it was faced with workable competition in the relevant grocery product market.

The plan comes after the ACCC last year conducted an inquiry into Australia’s supermarket sector and found it to be dominated by Coles and Woolworths, with significant barriers to competitors entering and expanding on a large scale.

The commission noted Coles and Woolworths were among the most profitable supermarket businesses in the world and had “limited incentive” to compete with each other on price in Australia. The proposed gouging ban would be enforced by the ACCC and apply to Coles, Woolworths and any other retailer whose revenue exceeds \$30 billion in the preceding financial year.

LIAM KENNEDY

Are you ready for surveillance pricing?

As we collectively watch the AI-generated horse bolt further and further into the distance in stunning can't-even-tell-it's-AI-anymore clarity, you'd be forgiven for being more than a little concerned about what's in store for us humble, fallible, exhausted human beings.

You've heard of drip pricing, surge pricing, maybe even dynamic pricing, but what about surveillance pricing? Obviously, it's not good. If you don't want your day ruined, now's a good time to stop reading and move on to the next article.

Surveillance pricing refers to the harvesting and analysis of your personal data, with the help of AI, to give you a personalised price. How helpful of AI to work out the exact maximum that you're willing to pay for a product or service, and the optimal way to sell it to you!

It's like a market just for you, where they know everything about you – short of being able to directly listen to your actual thoughts! Phone battery on 2%? That ride's now 50% more than they'll charge the person next to you with a full battery, because there's a price for your desperation.

Of course, personalised pricing and offers have existed for a long time, but AI could supercharge this practice –

making it easier than ever before to shake every last dollar out of us as we reluctantly enter a hyper-personalised world. If nothing's done, this could see the biggest power shift in recent times – as what little bargaining power we have left as consumers is gifted to massive corporations. Whoa Nelly!

While the Australian Consumer Law offers some protection, it's lagging woefully behind, and you know what they say about standing behind horses.

Do you think you've experienced surveillance pricing? Share your experiences by emailing me, a real human (not an AI horse), at campaigns@choice.com.au.

ANDY KELLY

Optus failures lead to new triple-0 rules

It hasn't been a good look for Australia's second-largest telco. In the Optus outage of 28 September 2025, nine triple-0 calls reportedly failed to get through, and three people reportedly died after failing to connect to triple-0 during a bigger Optus outage that occurred ten days earlier. In 2023, a nationwide Optus outage left around 10 million people without service and 2000 calls to triple-0 unanswered.

In October 2025, the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) called on the federal government to make a reliable triple-0 system a condition of Optus's licence to operate.

Later that month, the Australian Communications and Media Authority approved the registration of new rules to strengthen Australia's triple-0 ecosystem. The new Emergency Calling – Network and Mobile Phone Testing Industry Code requires telcos to provide network equipment and support testing by the National Telecommunications Resilience Centre aimed at making sure triple-0 calls go through at all times.

"Every time the network goes down, it undermines public confidence and puts people at risk. This can be catastrophic and cause immense harm. The community must have confidence that the emergency call system works 100% of the time when they most need it," says ACCAN CEO Carol Bennett.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

IMAGES GETTY



SMS scam fight-back plan delayed

An initiative to protect Australians from SMS impersonation scams has been delayed and is now expected to come into effect in July 2026. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) had previously announced the SMS Sender ID Register would be up and running by December 2025. Advocacy group the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network says the delay gives regulators and businesses the extra time they need to make sure the register is implemented properly.

A sender ID is the name that can appear at the top of a text message thread to tell you who it's from. Companies and government

agencies often use them when communicating with consumers, but scammers have been able to use technology to send malicious messages under the same IDs. Under the register initiative, organisations wanting to keep sending messages under their ID will have to register it with ACMA. When the register comes into force, it will block messages using registered IDs that aren't coming from the associated sender. Messages from unregistered IDs will be labelled "Unverified" to help recipients spot potential scam texts.

Scammers have been able to use technology to send malicious messages

LIAM KENNEDY



Privacy Act penalty the first of its kind

In a groundbreaking October court judgement, Australian Clinical Labs (ACL) was ordered to pay \$5.8 million in penalties for violations of the Privacy Act following a data breach in February 2022 that resulted in the personal medical information of 223,000 people potentially falling into the hands of scammers.

It was the first time a business had paid a penalty in a privacy violation case brought by the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC), which oversees the Act. Most of the penalty (\$4.2 million) was for failing to protect the data in the first place.

The breach was a major cybercrime incident, yet ACL dragged its heels – first by failing to investigate whether a data breach had occurred and then by taking too long to inform the OAIC once the business knew its systems had been infiltrated.

"This outcome represents an important turning point in the enforcement of privacy law in Australia," says Privacy Commissioner Carly Kind. "For the first time, a regulated entity has been subject to civil penalties under the Privacy Act, in line with the expectations of the public and the powers given to the OAIC by parliament."

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

Time to ban crypto ATMs, say consumer advocates

Crypto currency ATMs are increasingly being used for scam activity targeting older victims and Consumer Action Law Center CEO Stephanie Tonkin says the federal government should ban them all together. The Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre (Austrac) says the machines handle 150,000 transactions involving \$275 million a year. As well as charging transaction fees of up to 17% and flat fees of up to \$4, the ATMs are increasingly being linked to scams.

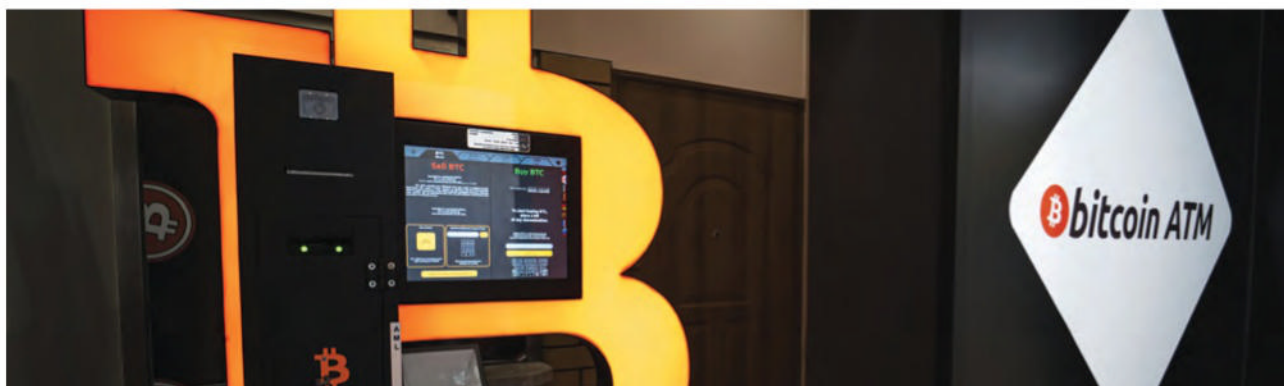
“We have assisted victims of sophisticated crypto scams like these. They are heartbreaking stories of people groomed and trained to ‘invest’ their money when the

stark reality is they are being robbed in broad daylight,” Tonkin says.

“The evidence is disturbing, and I find it incredible that household names like AusPost, BP and IGA host these crypto ATMs instore, bringing an aura of instant credibility to what is a business being used for financial crime.”

With over 1700 machines across the country, Australia has the third-highest number of crypto ATMs in the world and, according to AUSTRAC, the main demographic using them are 60–70-year-olds, which is in contrast with general cryptocurrency ownership trends.

JARNI BLAKKARLY



Cash acceptance mandate falls well short

The federal government has released the final version of its proposal to require certain businesses to accept cash payments. While the original proposal from December 2024 included a broad range of products and services, the government’s new policy would, if enacted, only apply to supermarkets and petrol stations. There are millions of Australians who rely on cash. Some of them rely on it every day, others only when something goes wrong. But the government’s new proposal has been heavily watered down, meaning Australians won’t be guaranteed the legal right to pay cash for medicine, medical supplies, utilities, mobile phones, public transport, clothing, shoes, school expenses or childcare. We consider all these things to be

essential – apparently the government does not.

In regional and remote First Nations communities, where internet and phone coverage can be unreliable or non-existent, many people still rely heavily on cash to make payments. Through wide exemptions for small business, the government’s proposal excludes these communities from the mandate, by making it only applicable to large supermarkets and petrol businesses.

CHOICE is fighting hard to shift the government’s position, and make sure that consumers can use their preferred payment method – in many cases their only payment method – for things they can’t live without.

MORGAN CAMPBELL



Health regulator and ATO issue warning as superannuation withdrawals to pay for dental soar

The Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) and the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) have issued a joint warning to both patients and medical practitioners over the use of superannuation to pay for overly expensive or unnecessary medical treatments. The number of early super withdrawals to pay for dental services has doubled in two years and the ATO says some medical professionals are inappropriately supporting people to access their super for cosmetic procedures that aren't aligned with compassionate release requirements.

To access your super for dental work, two practitioners need to certify it is necessary to alleviate acute or chronic pain, but as a CHOICE investigation last year found, some dentists and third-party companies are skirting the rules.

"While superannuation can be accessed early under compassionate grounds, this is strictly available in very limited circumstances including for critical medical and dental procedures," ATO deputy commissioner Emma Rosenzweig says.

"I want to make it clear, compassionate release of super should only be considered as a last resort, where all other options of paying for the eligible expenses have been exhausted."

JARNI BLAKKARLY



Planned changes to super tax laws don't go far enough

Early in 2025, the federal government proposed changes to superannuation tax concessions. In October, the Treasurer announced modifications to the proposal and an expansion of support for low-income earners.

These include:

- increasing the Low-Income Superannuation Tax Offset (LISTO) to \$810 and raising the income threshold to \$45,000 from 1 July 2027, meaning 770,000 additional Australians will become eligible for the assistance and 490,000 will receive a higher payment
- changes to the government's pledge to impose a 15% tax on earnings on super balances over \$3 million. Now they say the planned tax would only apply to realised gains, and the threshold would be indexed over time
- introducing a new 40% tax rate on balances over \$10 million.

"These changes nudge the system in a fairer direction. But the system still gives too big a leg-up in the form of tax concessions to people who don't need them without addressing the needs of those who are doing it tough in retirement," says Super Consumers Australia CEO Xavier O'Halloran.

Super Consumers Australia is calling for broader reforms, including:

- increasing Commonwealth Rent Assistance, to help older Australians facing rental stress
- investment in independent retirement guidance, so people can make the most of what they have
- mandatory customer service standards for super funds.

ANTOINETTE DYCE





Sweet dreams are made of this

The Ninja Swirl is an appliance that not only churns frozen mixtures into regular scoopable ice cream but can also turn that ice cream into soft-serve style swirls, straight into your cup or cone via a built-in dispenser.

It comes with two 470mL tubs for your mixtures, a bowl that the tubs are placed into for processing, a paddle, lids, the soft-serve attachment and a drip tray. With soft-serve and scoop programs, you can even create desserts like sorbet, thickshakes, frozen yoghurt, gelato and fruit whip.

"The benefit is that you can customise the flavour to suit your taste and dietary requirements, knowing exactly what's going into your frozen treats," says CHOICE expert tester, Elias Plastiras.

Every ice cream maker needs a pre-prepared custard mixture or fruit base. Unlike other machines that freeze and churn the mixture for you, the Ninja Swirl only does the churning. You'll need to add the mixture to the supplied tubs and leave it in the freezer for 24 hours before it can be churned in the machine, so planning is essential.

There's also a mix-in program that allows you to add things like choc chips. However, there's no mix-in chute, so you'll need to remove the tub to add the bits directly into your mix by hand.

The Swirl is simple to use and well-labelled, with easy-to-follow recipes.

There are many parts (all dishwasher-safe) that need thorough cleaning. When making soft serve, there'll be remnants left over that need to be manually

scooped out of the dispenser, as not all of the mixture will get pushed out by the machine.

It's quite tall and bulky, so you'll need a dedicated area to store it permanently on your kitchen bench or space to put it away (even a standard-sized cupboard is likely not tall enough). The machine also gets very loud when churning.

For performance, Plastiras was impressed with how light and fluffy the soft serve feature was.

"For the best results, make your ice cream, put it back in the freezer, then back into the machine for a re-spin before making your soft serve," he says.

Doing this will help it to hold its shape a bit longer.

For vanilla ice cream, the result was good, creating a uniform consistency with a smooth and creamy mouthfeel with vanilla beans evenly distributed throughout the mixture. The vegan frozen yoghurt was very good; however, the higher water content with minimal sugar means this dessert is best consumed immediately after churning. The

lemon sorbet had good flavour, but because it has no milk solids it melts much quicker when churning, so you can't scoop it out like you would an ice cream.

CHOICE VERDICT

The novelty of soft-serve could wear off quickly and then you're left with a bulky machine that's awkward to store and even more time-consuming to clean. So, consider if you'll get your money's worth before you rush out to buy one of these appliances.

You can save money by opting for the original Ninja Creami NC300 (the same appliance, but without the soft serve functionality) or another, cheaper ice-cream maker. We've tested models that cost less, produce better results and do the freezing and churning all at once.

REBECCA CIARAMIDARO



NINJA SWIRL BY CREAMI

PRICE \$550

CONTACT www.ninjakitchen.com.au



Telstra pays \$18 million for duping customers

Internet speeds can be very difficult for a household telco customer to measure, so it's hard to know whether you're getting the download and upload speeds you're actually paying for. In fact, your internet service provider may just be promising you one speed and delivering another.

As a case in point, Telstra recently paid an \$18 million penalty in a case brought by the ACCC for moving 8897 customers on its Belong NBN plans to a lower speed plan without telling them. Their upload speeds went from 40 Mbps (megabits per second) to a sluggish 20 Mbps, meaning data sent from their devices to the internet, such as emails or video calls, would have moved in slow motion.

Having customers pay for one service and giving them a lesser one is illegal.

"The \$18 million penalty sends a strong message to all businesses that they cannot mislead consumers by making changes to key aspects of a service without informing customers of those changes," says ACCC commissioner Anna Brakey.

The court judgment also requires Telstra to reimburse the customers \$15 each for every month they were on the slower plan, or around \$2.3 million in total.

"Misleading pricing and claims in relation to essential services, with a particular focus on telecommunications, is one of ACCC's current enforcement priorities," Brakey says.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN



CHOICE makes submission to strengthen Aviation Consumer Protections Charter

In October 2025, CHOICE made a submission to the Aviation Consumer Protections Charter, the second version of what was previously known as the Aviation Customer Rights Charter. This new draft is a significant improvement on the first version, which offered fewer protections than many airlines already provide. This time, we're seeing greater clarity for consumers dealing with cancelled and delayed flights.

The Charter sets out when travellers are entitled to a refund, the option to rebook or for further compensation in the form of meal and accommodation vouchers, both for circumstances within and outside of the airline's control. But we believe there is still room for improvement.

The final Charter should establish clear rights for all cancellations, not just those occurring within seven days of the scheduled departure. Consumers should also be informed of their rights to a refund when booking their flight and be told the reason for the delay or cancellation when it happens.

CHOICE is also calling for unused flights credits to be refunded when they expire, and for clearer entitlements for damaged baggage. CHOICE has long campaigned for stronger consumer protections in the aviation sector, and we will continue working to ensure these protections reach new heights.

BEA SHERWOOD

Amazon hit with record fine in the United States

Amazon has been fined a record \$US2.5 billion (\$3.8 billion) in the United States for signing up millions of consumers to Prime subscriptions without their consent and making it difficult for them to cancel the service. As well as being ordered to cease the deceptive practices, Amazon will pay \$1 billion in fines, and \$1.5 billion in refunds to affected consumers.

“The evidence showed that Amazon used sophisticated subscription traps designed to manipulate consumers into enrolling in Prime and then made it exceedingly hard for consumers to end their subscription. Today, we are putting billions of dollars back into Americans’ pockets, and making sure Amazon never does this again,” says US Federal Trade Commission chairman Andrew N Ferguson.

JARNI BLAKKARLY



IMAGES: GETTY



New win for Victorian drivers

Driver in Victoria can now compare fuel prices at different service stations in real time after the state became the last in Australia to introduce a compulsory price reporting and comparison scheme. The going rates of different types of fuel at more than 1200 outlets across the state are now visible via the Servo Saver feature on the Service Victoria app. Retailers are required by law to update their prices on the platform, which Consumer Affairs Victoria says could save drivers in Melbourne alone hundreds of dollars a year. Businesses will still have to display prices on roadside boards.

The state’s scheme was first announced earlier this year and has been operating since October. Prior to this, fuel price reporting in Victoria was voluntary and local information shared on third-party comparison platforms was patchy. Meanwhile, other state and territory governments have been requiring fuel retailers to report prices and running their own comparison services for years. Consumer Affairs Victoria will monitor the new initiative to make sure retailers meet requirements and consumers can use Servo Save to report businesses failing to comply.

LIAM KENNEDY



CTP insurance for Western Australians

In *CHOICE* Oct 25, we included a nationwide guide to comprehensive third-party car insurance, but it was missing one essential element – the section on Western Australia. We sincerely apologise to our Western Australian readers – thank you for bringing the mistake to our attention.

CTP insurance in WA is called Motor Injury Insurance and is operated by the Insurance Commission of Western Australia. Here, CTP insurance is fault-based – you'll only be covered if you weren't negligent and are not at fault.

WHAT'S COVERED?

If you are injured in an accident and you're not at fault, you are covered for:

- compensation for pain and suffering (and other general damages)

- loss of wages
- claims management expenses
- care and support, such as medical treatment and rehabilitation.

If you suffer a catastrophic injury such as a traumatic brain injury, severe burns, multiple amputations or a spinal cord injury, you are covered regardless of fault under the state government's Catastrophic Injury Support scheme. This can include:

- ambulance, medical (including pharmaceuticals) and dental treatment and rehabilitation
- support services such as domestic assistance
- aids, appliances and prostheses
- education and vocational training
- home and transport modification.

COST

For a regular motor car, you'll pay \$505 for 12 months.

JANE BARDELL

Pet insurance costs the same as health insurance

We've covered the extortionate rise in gold hospital insurance policies extensively – the price of top level Gold cover has increased by about 58% in the past five years. So how does human insurance compare with pet insurance?

Joe emailed us recently to let us know. "My HCF pet insurance for my single dog is now the same as for my Gold coverage with HCF."

To insure his nine-year-old Pekingese dog, HCF charged Joe \$386 a month, or \$4630 a year. HCF's Top Advanced Hospital Gold policy with extras (for a human) costs \$390 a month, or \$4684 a year. HCF told Joe: "Health insurance is community rated, which means everyone pays the same premium for their health insurance regardless of their individual health status, age or claims history. This is not the case with pet insurance."

This is true, but as Joe says, "something ain't right". And we tend to agree.

JODI BIRD





RANTS AND RAVES

How buying blind helps big booze



Would you ever buy something without knowing the price? It goes against everything we're told to do as smart consumers, but if you've ever bought a drink at a bar, chances

are you've been buying blind.

Step into any pub and you'd have a hard time knowing the going rate of the tap beers, house wines or mixed drinks on offer until one's been poured and it's time to pay. This isn't a problem if you're frequenting the same establishments and settling for the same drinks each time, but venture beyond your local, or take a risk on a new beverage, and you'll probably find yourself raising an eyebrow at the price.

A few months ago, a CHOICE member got in touch to vent about the seeming reluctance of pubs to display drink prices. This longstanding practice had recently led to him ordering a beer that ended up costing \$20 – much more than he would've liked to pay for a brewed refreshment.

Similar interactions must be happening all around the country these days, on the back of a period when inflation reached levels not seen in decades. When we shared the member's experience on the CHOICE Community online forum, others said they'd also recently been shocked by how much they'd been asked to pay after being handed a drink. Those who did take the time to ask how much their booze of choice would cost before it was served encountered bar staff who didn't know and grumbles from other patrons waiting to be served. Several pondered whether you can actually refuse a drink once it's been poured if you're unhappy with the price.

I'm sure this is possible, but I've never seen it done. It feels wrong, almost against the spirit in which we hold drinking. Skipping a quiz about prices with bar staff in favour of a chat about our day or the weather helps

build the camaraderie a lot of us seek when sinking a drink or two. Having been on both sides of the counter, I know buying alcohol isn't approached the same way as other purchases. Deep down, we feel those serving the drinks are letting us enjoy ourselves and aiding us in doing something we really shouldn't. So how dare we question the terms on which they're offered?

Cultural mores like these are immovable, but they'd be easier to swallow if some of the businesses with a hand in setting prices weren't billion-dollar global behemoths.

Last year, a senate inquiry investigating economic competition described Australia's beer sector as "one of the most restricted in the world". It noted our supply of the beverage is dominated by two large brewers who hold around 85% of market share. The senators said that, while Australians pay among the world's highest prices for beer, the profit margins of these companies were "enormous".

Surely these big booze businesses must be benefiting from our national reluctance to question going rates at the tap. I don't want to turn trips to the pub into a haggling exercise, but these institutions could do consumers a favour and give us a bit more information so we can compare prices and save.

LIAM KENNEDY

Step into any pub and you'd have a hard time knowing the going rate of the tap beers, house wines or mixed drinks



ASK THE EXPERTS

Got a niggling question our team can help with?

ASK US

Email your question to asktheexperts@choice.com.au or write to Ask the Experts, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204. You can also tap into the 'brains trust' at www.choice.community.

Q I'm looking for quotes for my home and content insurance. I notice that most insurers automatically include flood cover. But in our area we don't need it, so I'm thinking premiums should be a lot cheaper. However, I can only find one major insurer who doesn't automatically include flood cover. What's your advice?

A CHOICE home insurance expert **Dan Graham:**

Insurers will tend to say that if there is no risk of flood in



your area, then having the cover won't add anything to your premium anyway. It's difficult to tell if this is true or not.

There are a few insurers that offer flood cover as optional: Budget Direct, Coles, ING, Ozicare and Qantas. You could visit their websites for an online quote, and check if there's a price change if you toggle the optional flood cover off and on. That might also reveal whether the insurers assess your property as having a flood risk or not.



Q I'm travelling to the UK next year with my boyfriend who is a citizen. I know the UK has a reciprocal health agreement with Australia (my boyfriend gets free medical care here in Australia) so I'm wondering if I need to get travel insurance for the trip, or if I can just rely on the free healthcare in case I get sick or injured there. I'm not taking anything valuable and we're just getting cheap flights and staying with family over there, so I'm not too worried about cover for cancellations or baggage.

A CHOICE travel insurance expert **Jodi Bird:**

You're correct that Australia has a reciprocal agreement with the United Kingdom. That means if you have Medicare, you can get subsidised treatment for essential health services in the UK.



However, we still recommend you take out insurance for your trip. Even if you're happy to forgo cover for cancellations and lost or stolen items, travel insurance can still provide essential cover in case you become very ill and need to have a medical escort to bring you home

to Australia. It's also worth noting that without insurance you'll usually only be covered for urgent care that can't wait until you get home.

If you just want the cheapest policy with medical cover, see our review on page 36 and look for a policy with a high price score.

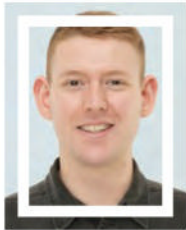




Q I recently bought a new coffee machine, but every time I use it, it vibrates so much that the cup moves out of the path of the coffee stream. So I have to hold the cup under the group head while the coffee is brewed. I took it back to the shop where I bought it but the store assistant told me it was normal for coffee machines to vibrate and suggested I should buy a silicone mat to stop the cup moving. Is it unreasonable for me to expect a coffee machine to be stable enough that I don't have to hold the cup in place while it works?

A **CHOICE**
coffee machine expert

Adrian Lini: We've tested hundreds of coffee machines over the years and from my experience, it's normal for coffee machines to vibrate during use – though usually not so much. There have been two machines we've tested that had noticeable vibrations to the point that you did need to stay close or hold the glass still while the machine operated. I definitely think this is a bad point for the machine, but it doesn't necessarily mean the machine is technically faulty. Having said that, it's poor design and a poor user experience, so I would say it's worth going back to the retailer or manufacturer, explaining the issue and they may offer you a refund. I don't think it's unreasonable to expect the glass to stay in place, but some vibration should be expected. We do observe vibration when we test coffee machines and if vibration is heavy we consider this to be a bad point, though it doesn't impact the overall score.



Too much information

Member Katrina got in touch with us about an issue she was having with an Airbnb booking. She booked and paid in full for three nights of accommodation on the Airbnb platform, but after booking, the accommodation provider got in contact with Katrina to ask that she provide her email address and complete an online registration process before her stay.

Katrina didn't wish to provide these details or complete a registration process just to stay at the accommodation, and she felt it was not reasonable to be forced to, especially after already paying in full (the Airbnb listing made no mention of any of these requirements).

She asked CHOICE if she had any protections in this situation, and how

to proceed without providing the details the accommodation provider was requesting. We suggested she let Airbnb know about the problem.

Katrina let us know that soon after calling Airbnb and explaining her problem she received a text from the property management company with directions to the property and a note that the key code would be sent at check-in time.

While Katrina was eventually able to complete her stay without providing her email and registering with the online portal, she was not happy with the inconvenience she was subjected to in order to simply stay at the accommodation she had booked. However, it's a good example of the power of standing one's ground.

Katrina didn't wish to complete a registration process just to stay at the accommodation



YOUR SAY

If you've had a bad experience, been ripped off or scammed, tell us and help other CHOICE members avoid the same traps. If you've had a great response to a complaint you've taken to a manufacturer or retailer, our members want to know about that too! Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

CONTACT US!

Email us at
yoursay@choice.com.au
 or write to Your Say,
 CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road,
 Marrickville, NSW 2204.

Contents warning

I have been drinking the same cordial (Golden Circle raspberry flavoured) for years as it's a 'safe' food for me. I have a bladder condition that means I must avoid artificial sweeteners. Recently I drank it as per usual and became painfully unwell. On investigation, I found that Golden Circle had replaced sugar with stevia in its cordial. I then found that Cottees and almost all supermarket brands have done the same. At this point, Bickfords and the basic Coles/Woolworths Blackcurrant flavours are about all I can find that are safe for me to consume.

There was no notification on the packaging, and the photos on the Woolworths/Coles apps displayed the old packaging and

ingredients. I rely on online shopping and delivery as I am disabled.

Another member of my family has coeliac disease and has experienced similar problems. One example was when Coles changed its hot chicken recipe. They were no longer gluten free, but there was no indication of this. It can have consequences for many people.

Liz Horton, McLaren Vale, SA



In response to the article on gift cards as a cash advance (Your Say, *CHOICE* Sep 25), I had no idea I'd been charged for a cash advance until the monthly statement came. In this case it was a Lotto ticket treated as a cash advance. This hadn't happened before and, like Helen Wong, I was completely surprised.

By then I was in a new statement period and being charged daily interest. It took me three payment cycles to finally clear the accruing debt from a single purchase.

Warren Lear, Brighton, SA



I am writing regarding the significantly high cost of the Australian passport. This fee is an unnecessary financial burden, particularly during ongoing cost-of-living challenges. The current fee for a 10-year adult Australian passport is \$412, one of the most expensive government-issued travel documents globally. A passport is a fundamental requirement for international travel, work, and study and the current fee presents a significant financial hurdle for many Australian individuals and families.

Maha Sivalingam, Rooty Hill, NSW





We recently constructed a shed in the Bundaberg region and had the power connected to it by Ergon, which as far as I am aware is our only choice of service provider in the area.

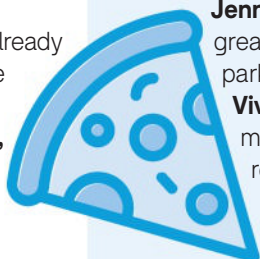
A month later, we received our first bill for \$52.49. As we have hardly used the power, I was curious to know why it was so much. I investigated and found that our total power usage was only 15 cents for the month. However, the service fee charged was \$52.34.

Effectively, Ergon is charging over \$600 per year for having power connected to the building, whether we use it or not.

We also have another property which is a duplex (two units). This building has three power supply accounts – one for each tenant and one for us, as we pay the power account to run the septic system. On average, the power to run the septic is around \$10 per month. Again, we are being charged a monthly service fee of approximately \$42.37 per month. Ergon would therefore be making at least \$1500 a year in service fees.

With the cost of electricity already excessively high, these service fees feel like a money grab.

Rose Deering,
Bundaberg, Qld



CHOICE SOCIAL MEDIA

Join the conversation online. We're on Facebook, Threads, Instagram and our own forum, CHOICE Community. This month: AI, pizza, ice cream and coffee.

Community choice.community



Artificial intelligence (AI) – is it reliable or is it hype?

@jezz: My friends and I have used AI to assist in generating itineraries for travel. It is helpful, but it is also necessary to check the answer with other sources. For instance, AI recommended that I stay in a town in Norway which has only one hotel with bad reviews. Another town a few kilometres further away had a much better option.

@Jeff: Quite a few people are confused and wary of AI and its influence on the outcome of searches ... by adding “-ai” after the search string, Google won't use AI and you will get the answers in a way you are more accustomed to.

@phb: How about a spot of fishing? Google's AI tells fishers they can keep sharks in protected areas. AI is convenient, but it can't be used as a defence when someone gets a substantial fine.

Facebook @choiceaustralia



Should you buy a pizza oven?

Martin H: Bandit from *Bluey* got one, so I want one!!!

Steve E: I'm not considering a pizza oven – lack of space in both kitchen and yard, but an Italian colleague built his own, and it cooks more than just pizzas.

Jenny E: No thanks, we have great equipment in a public park across the street.

Vivian B: Doesn't cost much to run, no skills required, too.

Instagram @choiceaustralia



What's your favourite vanilla ice cream?

@almost.macgyver: The best will always be Weis Vanilla Bean ice cream ... but discontinued.

@darklord1964: Cape Byron vanilla made at Lismore by Norco is the best, and it is real ice-cream. Woolworths sell it in bigger stores.

@jekimlou: I love the vanilla Connoisseur ice cream and only buy it on special. What's the point in buying a cheap one if you don't like it?

@welshwanderer: The cheap ones aren't even ice cream.



TikTok @choiceaustralia



What is your go-to coffee machine?

@Moi: Had a Breville for 10 years ☺

@peabrain: A simple French press is the way to go.

@David Danks: Have had a Silvia Rancilio for over 12 years and it's da bomb.

@joekool8: Easy. Don't buy any trendy brand. Buy simple, manual everything. ■



Cream of the crop

We sampled 25 vanilla ice creams from leading brands. **Rebecca Ciaramidaro** has the results of our taste test

Vanilla ice cream is a classic treat and a staple in the freezers of many. Loved for its smooth, creamy flavour, it can be enjoyed on its own or as an accompaniment to many desserts.

But with so many ice cream brands and styles now on offer at the supermarket, how do you know which product to choose? It's no longer as simple as deciding between vanilla or chocolate.

For starters, what's the

difference between ice cream and gelato?

Why do some ice creams contain additives? Is there a taste trade-off when choosing diet ice cream?

To be sold as ice cream, a product needs to meet certain requirements for milk fat and food solids

To help answer these questions and more, we reviewed and taste-tested vanilla ice creams available in Australian supermarkets. We included products labelled as vanilla ice cream, or those that presented

themselves as vanilla ice cream through the imagery or wording used on the packaging (see the definition of ice cream later in this article), and that are available nationally through at least one of the major supermarket chains. Our experts tasted the ice cream samples blind (without knowing the brands) in a randomised order. They rated the ice creams on flavour (40% of the CHOICE Expert Rating, which is our overall score), texture (30%), appearance (20%) and aroma (10%). We recommend products with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 80% or more.

Our expert taste testers

- **Vincent Piccolo** is an artisan gelato maker and the creative force behind his family's business, Art of Gelato. He has spent his life mastering the multigenerational recipes and techniques of his craft.
- **Petra Sugiarto** has an academic background in food technology and microbiology and has been working in the food industry for more than 20 years, in particular the dairy industry. For the past 14 years she's been on the judging panels for the DIAA and Sydney Royal Cheese & Dairy Produce competitions and for the AGDA.
- **Brigid Treloar** has been a freelance food consultant for over 30 years. The author of eight cookbooks, and co-author of three others, she also contributes to newspapers and magazines, reviews restaurants, lectures at Le Cordon Bleu and judges cookery and recipe competitions.



The tastiest ice creams

Of the 25 vanilla ice creams we included in our expert panel blind taste test, four received a CHOICE Expert Rating of 80% or more, earning them recommended status.

Three of these were home-brand products from Coles, Woolworths and Aldi, with these lower-cost options beating products from some of the more premium brands like Connoisseur and Haagen-Dazs. Norco products were hit and miss. The Cape Byron Ultimate Vanilla impressed our judges and was recommended, but that same brand's Classic Vanilla option was near the bottom of the table.



94% Coles Irresistible Vanilla Bean

Experts say: “Good quality ice cream”, “creamy texture, smooth”, “pleasant vanilla aroma”, “good appearance with vanilla seeds evident”, “good creaminess”.



89% Aldi Indulge Vanilla Bean Gourmet Ice Cream

Experts say: “Pleasant mild vanilla aroma, vanilla seeds evident, good vanilla flavour”, “a very pleasant ice cream”, “creamy nice mouthfeel”, “great balance in flavour and fat”.



85% Norco Cape Byron Ultimate Vanilla

Experts say: “Strong vanilla aroma”, “nice balance of vanilla flavour and sweetness level”, “creamy mouthfeel”, “very nice standard typical vanilla ice cream”, “smooth, no iciness in texture”.



81% Woolworths Vanilla Bean Indulgent Ice Cream

Experts say: “Nice balanced vanilla flavour and sweetness level”, “pleasant but mild vanilla aroma and mild vanilla flavour”, “good texture with vanilla bean seeds evident”, “balanced flavour”.

What's the definition of ice cream?

To be sold as ice cream, a product needs to meet certain requirements for milk fat and food solids. Food Standards Australia defines ice cream as “a sweet frozen food that is made from cream or milk products or both and other foods, and is generally aerated”. Crucially, it must contain at least 10% milk fat and 168g/L of food solids.

To be labelled as “reduced fat ice cream” it must contain at least 25% less fat than standard ice cream, and low fat versions must contain no more than 3% fat.

There are plenty of products in the freezer aisle that look like ice cream products but don't meet these requirements. If you check the nutrition panel, they may be described as something like “vanilla-flavoured frozen dairy dessert”.

GELATO

Gelato is the Italian word for ice cream, but there's no standard definition for gelato in Australia. It can be either milk-based or fruit-based, and doesn't necessarily contain dairy products. According to gelato producers, it's generally lower in fat – closer to 5%, compared with 10% or higher for ice cream – and churned less than ice cream.

When less air is incorporated into the mixture it results in a denser consistency, with a colder, fresher eating sensation – a common attribute of premium-tier ice creams as well as gelato.

SORBET

Sorbet is a French word that describes a frozen mixture of sweetened water and fruit juice or purée. Fruit-based, dairy-free gelato is sometimes referred to as sorbet. We didn't include sorbet in our taste test. ▶

What makes a good ice cream?

Ice cream is more than just frozen cream and milk, which would simply be hard and unpalatable. Sugar is added to reduce the freezing point of cream – and of course give it the sweetness essential to a dessert! And then the mix is churned to introduce air. From there, those components interact to create one of the world's most loved frozen treats. Here's how they work together.

1. ICE CRYSTALS

These are made from the water in the cream, and their size plays a big role in whether your ice cream feels silky smooth or a bit grainy.

2. CONCENTRATED CREAM

This is what's left of the cream after the crystallisation of its water. It contains the dissolved sugar, a bit of water (that stays liquid because of all the sugar), milk fats, and milk proteins. This concentration acts as the glue, holding those ice crystals together, which makes your ice cream solid.

3. AIR

While your ice cream is getting all churned up, air particles sneak in. They weaken the bond between the cream and ice crystals, which makes the ice cream softer and easier to scoop. And they increase the volume of the ice cream, sometimes up to a half air and half ice cream mix.

The key to making a good ice cream is the right balance between these ice crystals, concentrated cream and the air. The resulting product should be creamy, smooth, firm and just a little bit chewy. And it should have a milk fat percentage between 10 and 20%.

In vanilla-flavoured ice cream, the strength of flavour is also very important too.

Additives in ice cream

Ice cream sometimes contains additives, most commonly emulsifiers, stabilisers and thickeners. The emulsifiers help to promote the formation of a whipped fat structure in the product during freezing, which gives good melting resistance when being eaten. They also promote a longer shelf life and creaminess in the ice cream. Stabilisers and thickeners give a rich, creamy mouthfeel.

They also play a useful role to limit the increasing size of ice crystals during storage. When a freezer goes through its cycles – warming up and cooling down again – small ice crystals present in the product can eventually grow into larger ones over time, typically resulting in a coarse texture and iciness. Stabilisers and thickeners help to prevent this.

Traditionally ice cream producers would include eggs in their recipe to help perform these functions, but there are a few reasons why they may choose to use additives instead. Additives are more robust and easier to store and transport than eggs. Eggs are also a common allergen, so removing them from the recipe makes the product more widely accessible. Crucially, additives are more consistent in price and availability than eggs and are significantly more cost-effective.

COLOUR

The colour of ice cream is important; it's the first thing we notice when we look at it. Most of the ice creams included in this test contain added colour. The additives are usually beta carotene (also listed as 160a), lutein (160b) or annatto (161b). These all lend a yellow/orange colour to food. These colours are used to mimic the colour of egg yolk, which is traditionally used

to make ice cream. These additives have been approved by the Australian Food Standards (FSANZ) as safe to use in foods.

Three of the products we tested contained egg yolk rather than added colour: Haagen-Dazs Vanilla, Elato Triple Vanilla and Sara Lee Creamy French Vanilla Ice Cream.

BEEF-DERIVED GELATINE

If you're a vegetarian then you'll want to avoid the Golden North Vanilla Ice Cream, which was the only product we tested that contained gelatin. Gelatin is added to many foods and comes from the skin, bones and tendons of animals. It's used to thicken or provide a desirable texture in the ice cream.

Diet ice cream

Ice cream is an indulgence and you expect there to be cream, milk and sugar in abundance – with their associated fat and kilojoules. Low-kilojoule or low-sugar ice cream is an option, but when you remove these do you also remove the deliciousness?

Of the 18 products we tested that stated their milk fat percentage, six were below 10%. But while there may be a lot of options for people looking for lower fat ice cream, unfortunately most of those products languish in the bottom half of the results table. One exception was the Aldi Monarc Silver Scoop Creamy Vanilla Flavoured, which has a milk fat percentage of 6% and scored 72% for taste, which we consider to be a good result.

On average, the diet products (categorised as those containing less than 3g of fat per 100g) contained an average of 629 kilojoules per 100g, compared with the average 842 kilojoules per 100g in the regular ice cream products we tested. Per serve it's not a big difference, so if you're trying to cut down on kilojoules, you'll still need to be careful to not overdo it.

The key is the right balance between ice crystals, concentrated cream and air

		COSTS		PERFORMANCE AND SPECIFICATIONS							
Recommended		Price (\$)	Price/100ml (\$)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Pack size (g)	Energy/100g (kJ)	Fat/100g (g)	Saturated fat/100g (g)	Sugars/100g (g)	Gluten-free	Diet (< 3g fat/100g)
✓	Coles Irresistible Vanilla Bean	6.50	0.65	94	1000	945	12.4	9	16.6		
✓	Aldi Indulge Vanilla Bean Gourmet Ice Cream	5.99	0.60	89	1000	940	13.5	9.6	17.6		
✓	Norco Cape Byron Ultimate Vanilla	10.00	1.00	85	1000	940	13.4	9.7	20		
✓	Woolworths Vanilla Bean Indulgent Ice Cream	6.50	0.65	81	1000	886	13	8.7	18.2		
	Bulla Creamy Classics Vanilla	11.00	0.55	75	2000	843	10.4	7.1	19.9		
	Aldi Monarc Silver Scoop Creamy Vanilla Flavoured	5.49	0.27	72	2000	753	6.7	4.6	21.7		✓ (A)
	Bulla Murray St Ice Creamery Vanilla Bean	12.00	1.20	69	1000	881	12.3	8.4	21.8		
	Elato Triple Vanilla	12.50	2.63	69	475	873	12.8	8	16.8		
	Bulla Real Dairy Vanilla	6.00	0.30	67	2000	722	6.1	4.2	20.9		✓ (A)
	Kapiti Vanilla Bean	7.99	0.80	67	1000	984	14.7	9.8	19.1		
	Connoisseur Classic Vanilla	12.00	1.20	64	1000	930	10.8	7.3	19.6		
	Peters Original Vanilla	5.50	0.28	64	2000	760	6.4	5.9	22.7	✓	✓ (A)
	Peters Light & Creamy Classic Vanilla	6.50	0.36	63	1800	660	2.7	2.4	21.5		✓ (B)
	Sara Lee Creamy French Vanilla Ice Cream	12.00	1.20	61	1000	938	13.7	9.4	21.2		
	Streets Blue Ribbon Classic Vanilla	6.50	0.33	61	2000	783	7	5.8	18.5		
	Peters Light & Creamy French Vanilla	6.50	0.36	58	1800	660	2.7	2.4	21.5		✓ (B)
	Haagen-Dazs Vanilla	13.50	2.95	54	457	1040	16.9	11.3	19.9		
	Peters No Sugar Added Vanilla Low Fat Ice Cream	8.00	0.67	52	1200	510	2.4	2.2	8.7		✓ (C)
	Golden North Vanilla	13.45	0.67	51	2000	845	10.5	7.7	21.3	✓	
	Streets Blue Ribbon Light Vanilla	6.50	0.33	50	2000	685	2.7	2.2	20.6		✓ (B)
	Aldi Milfina Vanilla	6.99	0.17	47	4000	693	4.4	3.2	21		✓ (A)
	Coles Simply Vanilla	4.50	0.23	47	2000	698	4.3	3.5	20.7		✓ (A)
	Norco Classic Vanilla	6.00	0.30	46	2000	680	4.6	3.9	22.1		✓ (A)
	Pana Organic Vanilla Bean Frozen Dessert	13.00	1.37	46	950	857	13.4	12.3	18	✓	
	Woolworths Vanilla	4.50	0.23	43	2000	696	4.2	2.4	21.8		✓ (A)

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommended vanilla ice cream products with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 80% or more. **Price** Pack price in Sydney stores (not on special) as of October 2025. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of 100% taste test score. The taste test score consists of 40% flavour, 30% texture, 20% appearance and 10% aroma. **Energy, Fat and Saturated fat** are taken from the nutrition panel on the product purchased. **Gluten-free** As stated on the pack. **Diet** Whether the ice cream is a diet variety (e.g. low fat, no added sugar etc.). (A) Reduced fat. (B) 97% fat free. (C) No sugar added, 97% fat free. ■

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Aldi	D
Bulla	B
Coles	D
Connoisseur	F
Golden North	B
Haagen-Dazs	C
Norco	B
Pana Organic	B
Peters	F
Sara Lee	C
Streets	C
Woolworths	C

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

Throwing shade

Looking to invest in a beach shelter this summer?

Marg Rafferty helps you choose



Despite decades of advice urging us to slip, slop, slap, seek and slide, too many Australians still think that a dab of sunscreen and maybe a hat is all they need if they're heading out for a day at the beach.

Unfortunately, this simply isn't the case, and our high rates of skin cancer are proof that we still aren't getting the message about how harmful the sun can be.

Sally Blane, chair of Cancer Council's Skin Cancer Committee, says we need to use all five forms

of sun protection whenever the UV is 3 or above.

"Sunscreen is essential, but it is just one part of sun protection," says Blane. "Start with covering as much skin as practical with clothing that blocks the UV, then combine with broad-spectrum, water-resistant,

SPF50 or SPF50+ sunscreen, a broad-brimmed hat, shade and sunglasses for the best protection.”

And when it comes time to hit the water, the message again is to not just rely on sunblock.

“For the beach, rashies and longer swimsuits are best when swimming,” she says.

The importance of shade

Good quality shade is an essential part of any sun protection strategy. It can reduce UV exposure by up to 75%.

“Having portable or temporary structures on the beach gives you somewhere to retreat from direct UV radiation,” says Blane.

“Umbrellas, large tents, marquees and beach shelters are good options to create shade when other shade structures like trees or built shade structures might not be available.”

Blane cautions that UV radiation can still reach you via reflection, particularly around water, which is why it should be used in combination with other sun protection measures.

“Shade structures should also never be used to extend your time in the sun. While not always possible, minimising exposure to UV radiation from the sun is the most effective strategy to prevent skin cancer,” she says.

Different types of shelters and shade structures are a familiar sight on Aussie beaches, from umbrellas to tents and cabanas, and you can spend anywhere from \$9 up to hundreds of dollars on products from a wide range of brands that promise to keep you and your family protected from the sun. We look at a few of the different types available and some things to consider before you buy.

What to look for

LEVEL OF PROTECTION

The first factor to consider is the level of sun protection your shelter gives.

For portable shade, a good-quality product provides protection from direct UV from the sun, as well as from scattered and indirect UV from reflective surfaces like water, sand and snow.

“This means that the fabric or materials used in the product have a UVE (Ultraviolet effectiveness) rating of 95+% and [the structure and design] considers indirect UV radiation with an option for vertical screening,” says Blane.

UVE refers to ultraviolet effectiveness and is shown as a percentage. It’s used in relation to shade fabrics, and it measures

the transmission of solar UVR (ultraviolet radiation) through the fabric. The closer the weave, the greater the protection. Materials with a high UVE rating offer better protection, and a UVE rating of 95+ is the most effective.

SIZE

Start by working out how many people you intend to fit under your beach shade so you can look for the right size.

WEIGHT AND SET-UP

Weight can also be a deciding factor, plus ease of set-up. For instance, is it a one-person job or will you need extra help? The last thing you want is a sweaty struggle to put up or pack away a beach shelter while standing on scorching sand.

Also, be mindful of the quality of the fabric and the shelter’s overall durability – will it last? How sturdy will it be in those sea breezes? If you’re after something that offers privacy when you’re wriggling into or out of your swimmers, you want to be sure your shelter won’t blow away in a gust of wind!

Choosing the best type of shelter for you

Not all shade-throwing products are created equal, and each type has its pros and cons.



BEACH UMBRELLAS

Beach umbrellas are made from fabric with a sun-protective coating,

and have a long pole to stake in the sand. As well as the traditional umbrella design, you’ll find options with built-in side panels designed to be used close to the ground. These create more shade than the more familiar design and can appear quite similar to a small beach tent.

Look for an umbrella that lets you tilt the pole so you can arrange the sail to provide the maximum amount of shade as the sun moves. Some beach umbrellas come with a wind vent, which is designed to allow wind to pass through the canopy. This reduces the risk your umbrella will be caught by the breeze, turn inside out or even take flight down the beach.

Cost: Prices can start from as little as \$9, but expect to pay upwards of \$150 for some of the big-name brands. There are plenty of options between \$50 and \$100.

Pros:

- Easy to put up and down, plus they come in a variety of colours and pretty prints.
- Lightweight, portable and don’t cause too much of a visual block for other beach users.
- Users told us they loved the portability and ease of use of beach umbrellas. They were praised for being easy to carry, providing better views of the beach and allowing adjustment so that you can change the angle as the sun moves to keep you shaded. “Umbrellas are light, easy to carry and set up and take down. They are also adjustable when the sun moves,” one survey respondent told us. ▶

Good quality shade reduces UV exposure by up to 75%

Cons:

- Complaints included their unsuitability in breezy conditions and the limited shade they provide.
- Others found them difficult to secure and expressed concerns about the risk they pose if they catch the wind and tumble down the beach.
- “Umbrellas require digging a hole in the sand with your hands that is deep enough to hold the umbrella – hard work! And they fall and blow over and only provide shade for a couple of people,” one noted.

**BEACH TENTS**

Beach tents are usually made of lightweight polyester with a frame of some

kind, designed for easy set-up. Pop-up models allow you to simply unclip, and the whole structure will spring into shape. But be warned: some users find it challenging to fold them down when they've finished using them. Guy ropes, sandbags or pegs create extra staying power.

Beach tents that aren't the pop-up style will typically have a mechanism to pull the frame into shape. Sand pockets and pegs keep the shelter anchored, and may allow you to open the back or sides to boost ventilation.

Many include a floor to help keep the sand away, and the larger models may allow you to stand inside, which can make them more convenient. You'll find a range of sizes to suit one or two people or family groups of five or more.

Cost: We found models starting at \$25 all the way up to many hundreds of dollars.

Pros:

- They are often quick to set up.
- Models that zip up can provide privacy if you need to change.
- Models that open on the sides are good for catching a cross breeze.
- “Mine is a cheap and cheerful Kmart one I've had for years.

It's easy to set up, and has three walls so it has more privacy. I love having a shady place to relax in,” one survey respondent told us.

Cons:

- Complaints include their tendency to get quite hot.
- Many told us that they were hard to put away, especially in windy conditions. “I am traumatised by pop-up shades that I can never get back into the correct shape and always end up breaking,” said one user who responded to our survey.
- Versions that come with a floor may trap a lot of sand that has to be swept out later.
- Others complained that the structures are unsuitable for in a breeze and will collapse easily.

**CABANAS AND GAZEBOS**

Imagine that a tent and an umbrella have a child – that's essentially what

a cabana is. It's a square-shaped shelter with four legs (which have sandbags to secure it to the ground), a central pole to stake into the sand and a roof. Judging by the number of them on Aussie shores in the past few summers, they're a beach trend that's now well established.

Cost: Prices start from less than \$50 for a budget model all the way up to \$500. There are plenty of options around the \$200 mark.

Pros:

- Great for families because they're roomy and as they don't have a sloping roof there's no need to slouch to fit under it.
- If set up properly in safe conditions, cabanas are sturdy, as they're anchored in five spots.
- Manufacturers claim they're simple to put up and down.
- With no walls, they're well ventilated and don't block out views entirely.
- “I like the cabana for its simple set-up and the generous shade it provides. With its height and four

open sides, getting in and out is effortless. It stays put in the wind far better than an umbrella and feels safer without the risk of a sharp pole flying away,” one enthusiastic cabana user told us.

- “My Cool Cabana is the best investment as a redhead who lives in Exmouth! It's easy to put up and doesn't fly away in the wind (unlike my beach umbrella). It also doesn't get stinking hot (unlike a pop-up shelter),” another told us.

Cons:

- Not the cheapest option, so you'd need to be a committed beachgoer to get your money's worth.
- No privacy for getting out of your salty swimmers.
- Takes up a lot of room on the sand.
- You can't tilt the top of the cabana to follow the sun, so the shade can end up outside the cabana instead of under it as the sun moves.
- The space they take up was a definite con for many. “Cabanas should be outlawed! Or only allowed far away from the shore. They are just too big and overtake the beach,” one beachgoer complained.
- Models that come with guy ropes create trip hazards and add to the amount of space you take up, which may make you unpopular with others, particularly at busy beaches.

**CANOPIES AND SAILS**

Canopies and sails consist of a coated fabric for UV protection, held

up by aluminium poles and ropes. The result is an 'open-air tent' look.

Cost: You can find them for under \$60 but larger models can cost hundreds.

Pros:

- Can be lightweight and easy to carry.
- Some styles can be set up in different ways, depending on what kind of shade you want.
- Once packed, a canopy doesn't take up too much room, so you can keep it in the car ready to go.

- Fans of this style like the coverage they provide. “You don’t need to keep moving around to stay out of the sun,” one told us.

Cons:

- Once you’ve set up your canopy, it can take up a large area, so it’s not ideal on a crowded beach.
- Guy ropes used to hold up the canopy can also create a tripping hazard and you may need two people to hold the poles and ropes while setting up.
- You may need to adjust its tautness as the day goes on, depending on how windy it is.
- Because a canopy is entirely open, it won’t give you privacy either.

How popular are beach shelters?

We asked our CHOICE audience about their use of sun shelters at the beach.

Of those who responded to our survey, 96% said they had used a temporary shade structure when visiting the beach.

Those who hadn’t used one said it was because they don’t visit the beach often enough to make it worthwhile, or that when they do, they go to swim or surf and don’t spend a lot of time out of the water. Others said they found them to be cumbersome and inconvenient.

Of those who had used a sun shelter, pop-up tents were most popular, with 77% telling us they’d used one.

Umbrellas were next most popular (50%), followed by cabanas (35%). Non pop-up tents and canopies or sails were the least popular.

Complaints about different kinds of shelters mainly related to their flimsiness, their heaviness and their unsuitability for use when there’s any kind of wind. Several pop-up tent users also described problems packing away their shelter at the end of the day. ■

Once packed, a canopy doesn’t take up too much room, so you can keep it in the car, ready to go

Sunny side up



Considering a solar home battery? **Chris Barnes** and **Jason Treuen** share the key things you need to know before buying

Home battery storage is a hot topic for energy-conscious consumers, and with the recent launch of the federal government's \$2.3 billion rebate scheme, interest has gotten even more intense.

Officially known as the Cheaper Home Batteries Program, the new incentive offers around 30% off the total cost of installing a battery in eligible homes and small businesses.

With a flood of rebate-related promotions hitting the market (and the inevitable risk of dodgy installers), it's even more vital to understand battery costs, your power needs and how long a battery can take to pay for itself.

How home batteries work

A home battery stores any unused power generated from solar panels during the day for later use at night and on low-sunlight days. Battery capacity is measured in kilowatt-hours (kWh), which is a unit of energy production (or consumption) over time. One kWh is the same as one kilowatt (kW) of power delivered continuously for one hour.

Usually housed in a very nondescript box, batteries can come as a fixed, one-piece unit or as a modular system with stackable storage cells

that you can add to as your power needs and/or budget increases.

Battery systems also include an inverter, which can be built into the battery or as a separate unit. An inverter takes the direct current (DC) power from the battery and converts it to alternating current (AC) power to use for household electricity circuits.

The size of the inverter is rated in kilowatts (kW) and is the maximum amount of DC power that the inverter can draw from the battery, or send to it (i.e. charge it) at any one time. For example, if you

For many people, the main motivation for installing a battery is to cut power bills

have a 20kWh battery and a 5kW inverter, it can only deliver 5kW of power at that moment (above that and you'll start drawing power from the grid). Think of it like the battery is a water tank and the inverter is a tap connection – you can only draw or fill as much water as the tap allows.

If you already have solar panels installed, you'll need a separate inverter for the battery, but if you're getting both a new battery and panels, a hybrid inverter can manage both.

Why install a battery?

For many people, the main motivation is to cut their power bills considerably. You can save a lot of money by using your own stored electricity cheaply produced from your solar panels instead of buying it from the grid (see table on page 28 for projected annual savings). Other reasons to get a battery include environmental concerns about fossil fuels, energy independence from the grid and price hikes, protection against blackouts and even simply liking this new technology.

Home battery costs

Costs can vary significantly based on your installer, location and which brands you choose but, generally, the bigger the battery capacity, the more you can expect to pay.

Since the rebate was introduced, the average size of batteries being installed has increased significantly, with a system closer to 20kWh quickly becoming the new norm.

Given the average Australian household uses 16–20kWh daily, most will benefit from a battery with a capacity of 10kWh or more for night-time power. However, if you regularly run energy-hungry products like air conditioning, an electric water heater or pool pump, or charge an EV, you'll likely need to go even bigger.

According to our solar partners SolarQuotes, here are the typical battery costs you can expect to pay for common sizes. This includes the federal rebate, an inverter and standard installation, but does not factor in any additional state or territory rebates that may be available.

- 10kWh storage: \$7000–\$11,000
- 15kWh storage: \$11,000–\$15,000
- 20kWh storage: \$14,000–\$19,000
- 30kWh storage: \$18,000–\$22,000

Be aware a more difficult installation can bump up costs considerably, as architectural and technical factors can increase the time, work and equipment a job requires.

It's essential to get at least three quotes from reputable suppliers

If you already have older solar panels installed, you might need to upgrade your system to accommodate a battery or add extra panels to deliver enough power to charge the battery.

In some cases, if your system is particularly small, it can be more cost-effective to get a new larger solar panel system installed with your battery than retrofit your old one.

As with any big investment, it's essential to get at least three quotes from reputable suppliers. The best ones will take time to inspect your home and wiring thoroughly and discuss options to meet your home's power needs and usage patterns. ▶



A home battery set-up with electrical switchboard top left, battery inverter to its right, and battery underneath.

Are home batteries worth it?

It's a complex question and one that relies on multiple factors, including your system size, home energy consumption and grid electricity costs in your state or territory, which can vary dramatically.

For a long time, home batteries didn't make complete economic sense. They were relatively expensive and the payback time (how long it takes for your bill savings to pay off the cost of a battery) often exceeded their warranty period, which is typically 10 years.

However, with the new federal rebate, that equation is looking a lot more positive. Additionally, joining a virtual power plant (VPP) scheme can earn you bill credits by contributing solar and battery power to the grid, further reducing your costs and payback periods (more on VPPs later).

Calculating the maths can be mind-boggling, but this guide from SolarQuotes shows approximate electricity savings and payback periods. Note that these differ due to state and territory electricity prices and solar feed-in tariffs. Basically, the higher your grid electricity price, the more cost-effective a battery can be. For example, Adelaide has the shortest payback period due to high electricity prices, while Hobart has the longest due to relatively cheap prices and high solar feed-in tariffs.

Remember the feed-in tariff

When deciding whether a battery makes sense for your home, remember to consider the feed-in tariff (FiT). This is the amount you're paid by your electricity provider for any excess power generated by your solar panels and fed into the grid.

For every kWh diverted instead into charging your battery, you'll forgo the feed-in tariff. While the FiT is generally quite low in most parts of Australia, it's still an opportunity to consider to help you recover costs.

Virtual power plants

A virtual power plant (VPP) is a network of homes and businesses, each with their own solar and batteries, centrally controlled by a computer system run by the VPP-operating company. When you join, you agree to make stored energy in your home battery available to the operator, who can then use it to supply the grid in times of high demand. In return, you're paid a subsidy, which could come as energy bill credits, a rebate towards buying

When deciding whether a battery makes sense for your home, consider the feed-in tariff

BATTERY PAYBACK TIMES, BASED ON A 10KWH BATTERY*

City	Annual electricity savings	Simple payback period
Adelaide	\$1350	6.3 years
Brisbane	\$1100	7.7 years
Canberra	\$700	12.1 years
Darwin	\$620	13.7 years
Hobart	\$410	20.7 years
Melbourne	\$610	13.9 years
Perth	\$1120	7.6 years
Sydney	\$1030	8.3 years

*Using only federal rebate and \$8500 installed cost. Based on estimated overnight electricity consumption of 7kWh.





the battery, or even free solar and battery installation. Joining a VPP program won't always guarantee that your battery pays for itself and it can mean your own battery might run low at night when you want it, due to the VPP using some stored energy earlier that day.

Do batteries protect from blackouts?

For most grid-connected systems, having a battery won't necessarily help you in the event of a blackout. You may still lose all power to your home, despite having solar panels producing power and a charged battery ready and waiting.

This might seem surprising, but it's because grid-connected systems have what's known as 'anti-islanding protection'. During a blackout, the grid and any engineers working on the lines must be protected from

'islands' of electricity generation (such as your solar panels) pumping power unexpectedly into the lines.

For most solar PV systems, the simplest way to provide anti-islanding protection is to shut down entirely. More sophisticated inverters can provide anti-islanding protection during a blackout, but still keep your solar panels and battery operating to power your home. But expect to pay more, as the hardware is more expensive and you may need more solar and battery capacity to run the house for a few hours during a blackout.

To make your power last longer, you can choose to allow only critical household circuits to operate in a blackout, such as the fridge and lighting. A battery can drain very quickly if it also has to run things that draw a lot of power, such as a pool pump or underfloor heating. ▶

The home battery rebate explained

Launched in July 2025, the federal government's Cheaper Home Batteries Program gives homeowners, small businesses and community groups an upfront discount of around 30% on the purchase and installation of a home battery system that pairs with solar panels.

The rebate is based on the battery's usable capacity, up to 50kWh, with a maximum saving of \$372 per usable kWh. Once you deduct admin charges, it's more like \$330 per usable kWh, so a typical 10kWh battery would see a handy \$3300 discount applied to your quote upfront.

Just like the solar panel rebate, the rebate decreases every year and is currently set to end in 2030.

To be eligible for the rebate, the battery must:

- be installed on or after 1 July 2025
- have a nominal battery capacity of 5–100 kWh, with the rebate applied to the first 50kWh of usable capacity
- be installed alongside new or existing rooftop solar
- be on the Clean Energy Council (CEC) approved list
- be fitted by an installer accredited by Solar Accreditation Australia
- for on-grid systems, be capable of joining a virtual power plant, though actual participation is optional.

In addition to the federal incentive, some states or territories offer additional rebates or loan schemes, which can be combined for greater savings. Terms and conditions apply to all of them so you need to do your research to ensure you're eligible.

How to spot a bad battery deal

If you're shopping for a battery, you've probably already seen excited ads spruiking the 'best ever deals!' for 'super cheap solar!' or even 'free solar!'. Given batteries are expensive, complex and time-consuming to research, such deals can certainly be tempting, but be careful. Choosing a cheap offer could land you in all sorts of strife later, from inefficient or failing systems to shoddy installation to poor after-sales support.

To help you dodge a dud, we asked the founder of SolarQuotes, Finn Peacock, who has been working in the solar industry since 2009. Here's the warning signs he says to watch out for.

1 PUSHY DOOR-TO-DOOR SALESPeOPLE

Red flags don't get much bigger than being ambushed on your doorstep by doorknockers trying to sell you a deal. They're paid on commission so they're incentivised to push quick sales, inflate quotes and promote products that might not actually suit you or your power needs.

"I've literally never known someone to get a competitive deal from a doorknocker spruiking solar or batteries," says Peacock. "Any successful doorknocker is well versed in the art of persuasion, so they are likely to convince you to buy something without the due diligence required."

Ignore any high-pressure tactics like special 'today only' sales and never sign up then and there. If you are interested in the offer, instead take your time to research the company, their products and terms and conditions.

2 UNKNOWN BRANDS AND PRODUCTS

Since the rebate, there's been an influx of new battery products on the market as installers compete for business and try to keep up with demand. An unknown brand isn't always a deal-breaker – they must be on the Clean Energy Council-approved list to be eligible to get the rebate – but Peacock does advise extra caution and research.

"The newer the brand is to Australia, the higher the risk of it not being around for the long haul and the less evidence you have that its quality and support are up to scratch," says Peacock. "To counter the risk of a new product, use an older, established installation company. If you use a brand new company with brand new brands, you have double jeopardy."

3 MISMATCHED COMPONENTS

Channelling the 'bigger is better' tactic, many installers try to grab attention by offering huge batteries with 40–50kWh capacity for very cheap

prices. It sounds great, but too often they're paired with a small 5kW inverter, which will struggle to charge the battery and empty it.

"Your installer should look at your current and future energy load profile and size the inverter to suit accordingly. The one-size-fits-all approach is rubbish," says Peacock.

4 THE INSTALLER'S ABN IS NEW

With a slew of newly created companies chasing the rebate windfall, Peacock says to be wary of newcomers and to check their Australian Business Number (ABN) online. If it was only registered from April 2025 – when the government rebate was first announced – you should tread carefully.

5 FREE SOLAR OR NO-INTEREST OFFERS

Such deals might sound enticing given how pricey batteries can be, but Peacock warns against any offers that seem too good to be true.

"Someone has to get paid. 'Free solar' means giving your electricity to someone else and then buying it back from them. 'No-interest finance' means that they've taken the interest cost and whacked it onto the price of the system, unless it's a subsidised loan from a government scheme."

6 SWAPPING OUT COMPONENTS

"Installers sometimes have a clause that says they can swap components for 'similar', which is a huge red flag," says Peacock.

"If a company genuinely can't get hold of the hardware they've quoted, they should talk to you and create a new quote for new hardware, which you can then accept or decline."

Find a trusted solar installer at choice.com.au/solar-estimator. ■

Such deals might sound enticing, but be warned against any offers that seem too good to be true





The day the last bank left town

Like many communities around the country, the Victorian town of Yarram is reeling from the closure of their last bank. **Jarni Blakkarly** pays a visit

It's a Thursday morning, late September. In the quaint town of Yarram in Victoria's South Gippsland region, the local cafe in the middle of the main street is doing a roaring trade.

"Last day," an elderly woman says to the woman behind the cash register with a nod. "Last day," she says back with a laugh.

Yarram may have a population of just over 2000 people, and one that is significantly older than the national average, but as the vibrant main street shows, this is far from a dying town.

But from tomorrow onwards, there will be no more banks in Yarram. It's the end of a critical service that many residents depend on.

The Bendigo Bank branch, which is usually open until 4pm, will shut at midday for the very last time.

They couldn't even see out the day.

Sad day for the town

At 9:30am, the Bendigo Bank opens and a steady stream of customers begin rolling in to the branch. Most are older folks, but there are people of all ages.

Kyle, in his 30s and sporting a flannelette shirt and a beanie, soon exits the branch for what will be the final time. He says he has mixed feelings.

"Bendigo said they would stand by us when the other banks left, then they kind of betrayed us by all of a sudden saying they are going to shut down," he says.

"People need a face-to-face (bank) and we have an ageing population in this town, like a lot of small towns, and this is just another layer of services that are being taken away from us," says Kyle.

"There is this trend of removing services from the small rural towns ►



Closing notice at the Bendigo Bank branch in Yarram.

and forcing people to centralise in the rural centres and cities.”

Jenny, who is also coming out of the bank, says it’s a sad day for the town, and for the staff who work at the branch.

“When I first moved here we had four banks. So I really can’t understand why we can’t have one bank doing all the business and helping out the people of our town,” she says.

“I feel for the older people who can’t get to Traralgon or Sale to do their banking,” she says, referring to the nearest towns with major bank branches, which are 64 and 72 kilometres away respectively.

A man rides past on a bike, stopping for a moment to read the sign posted to the glass sliding doors of the bank. “Better get in quick, this says they are closing,” he yells over to me. “Sign of the times I guess, everything’s gone to the computers.”

Gaps in the moratorium

According to the federal government, 36% of regional bank branches across Australia have closed since 2017.

In February this year, a moratorium on regional branch closures was announced by the so-called ‘Big Four Banks’ with Commonwealth, ANZ, NAB and Westpac promising no more regional branch closures until the end of July 2027.

“Banks have a responsibility to regional communities and we’re holding them to it. We are making sure bank branches stay open in the bush,” Treasurer Jim Chalmers said at the time.

But the moratorium didn’t include smaller banks, such as Bendigo Bank, which announced in July they would be closing 10 branches across Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania.

**36%
of regional
bank branches
across Australia
have closed
since 2017**



Jenny is concerned for the older people who can’t easily travel to other towns to bank.

At the Yarram Progress Association office, just across the road from the bank, vice president Kevin Mackin says that when senior managers from Bendigo Bank came to town to ‘consult’, there was little that was constructive about the meeting.

“We came to the meeting wanting to solve a problem: ‘How do we have banking services in Yarram?’

They came to the meeting to tell us they were leaving and that was it. They weren’t willing to explore other options – shorter hours, smaller branches, community

bank options – everywhere we went trying to provide a solution was just a shut door,” he says.

A spokesperson for Bendigo bank says the decision to close the Yarram branch and ATM came following a review of customer preferences, a reduction in business activity and an increase in costs.

“Bendigo Bank is proud of its regional heritage and operates Australia’s second-largest regional

branch network,” the spokesperson told CHOICE. “Bendigo Bank maintains more branches per customer than any other Australian bank.”

Worries for the future

David Phelan is a 73-year-old stock and land broker who says he was proudly “born and bred” in Yarram. He has been fighting to make sure banking remains viable in the town.



Kevin Mackin from the Yarram Progress Association.



David Phelan is worried for the town's future.

"Commonwealth were the last ones to leave in 2021. When the Commonwealth left, I told the community the best thing we could do was go to the Bendigo, because if we all went to the Bendigo they couldn't possibly close, however they've chosen to close and made a liar out of me," he says.

David has been having meetings with major and smaller banks trying to entice them to the town. He says while the community is strong, he worries for the future.

"All of a sudden if you don't have a bank, you lose your vibrancy out of your main street. If you need to go to Traralgon to do your banking, what's the next thing you buy? A bit of groceries, instead of shopping in

Yarram. It does not help little towns," he says.

"The banks have tried to push everyone to electronic banking and it doesn't suit everybody. I feel for the older people in the town, they've never been brought up with computers and everything and they like to go into the bank and withdraw their pension. They trust the bank tellers to do the right thing," David adds.

One last trip to the bank

A few doors down from the bank, a red sign outside the Australia Post office informs customers they can deposit and withdraw cash there.

However, Kevin from the Yarram Progress Association says the services being offered by Bank@Post won't fulfill the town's full banking needs.

"Trust is really important in a banking relationship and a lot of our people believe they have a good relationship with the people in the bank, they trust them. That trust won't transfer to another operation very easily," he says.

Getting up and walking out onto the footpath, Kevin looks out over at the Bendigo branch. His anger is palpable.

"I believed all the marketing about being 'The Better Big Bank'," he says, referring to Bendigo bank's advertising slogan.

"I thought and believed they had a real sense of being a community bank and the sense that they were contributing to Australia, but I don't think that has been demonstrated in the way they've treated Yarram. They aren't 'The Better Big Bank',

they are worse than any of the banks I've dealt with."

Out on the street, an elderly couple approach the Bendigo ATM. It's 11:47am and the branch is about to close. After several minutes trying to work out how to use the machine, the man gives up frustrated and makes his way through the sliding doors into the bank.

At 11:53am, Yarram's last banking customer emerges from the branch, clutching a few \$50 notes and quickly putting them away in his wallet before walking down the street. Before the doors slide shut. And lock. ■

"If you don't have a bank, you lose your vibrancy out of your main street"



Locals say Bendigo Bank has let the community down.



Barrier to entry

Many retirees with low superannuation balances are still missing out on tax benefits, writes **Jarni Blakkarly**

An outdated quirk in the superannuation system could be costing low-income retirees thousands of dollars. Eight of the ten biggest super funds still require you to have a minimum balance to open what is called an ‘account-based pension’.

This is what most people move their super into during the ‘retirement phase’ of the superannuation journey. Some funds have recently moved to significantly lower the minimum amounts after the practice was called out by the CHOICE-affiliated advocacy group Super Consumers Australia (SCA) and media outlets, but requirements of \$10,000 to \$30,000 still remain. Just two of the top ten funds have no minimum requirements.

For those in the ‘accumulation phase’ of superannuation who are unable to open a retirement account in their current fund because of these rules, it means being sluggish with higher tax rates, despite the fact that these people with lower balances need to stretch each dollar further after stopping work.

Advocates are calling for super funds to rethink and scrap account-based pension minimums altogether.

What are account-based pensions?

Account-based pensions are designed to be a simple and flexible way to get a regular income stream in retirement.

You can get an account-based pension from a superannuation fund. The account-based pension will make a regular deposit into your nominated bank account, and you can choose how often you get this money – monthly, quarterly or yearly.

These accounts are designed to be flexible. You can select how much you get for each payment (as long as you meet the government’s minimum drawdown requirements).

You can also withdraw more money at any stage – for example, if you have an unexpected expense or decide to take a holiday. Or you can close down the pension and get your remaining super as a lump sum. Your account-based pension will stop paying you once you run out of super.

Confusingly, some funds have different names for these accounts,

such as ‘retirement income account’, ‘income stream’ or ‘superannuation income stream’.

Saving on tax

Everyone over the age of 65 (or 60 if you’ve stopped working) pays no tax on super withdrawals. But the income your superannuation makes while it’s

sitting in the account (that is, the interest) will be taxed if you remain in the accumulation phase.

That tax rate is 15%, compared to 0% in the retirement phase when your super becomes an account-based pension.

That’s why for many people who are no longer working and are of the eligible age, it’s beneficial to move into the retirement phase – if your super fund will let you.

Analysis in 2024 by Super Consumers and The Conexus Institute found that a member with a \$20,000 super balance could be more than \$2300 worse off over the course of their retirement because of the tax liabilities of staying in the accumulation phase.

Eight of the ten biggest super funds still require you to have a minimum balance to open an account-based pension

High-barrier funds lower their minimums

When Super Consumers highlighted this issue last year, Australian Super and Hesta were the funds with the highest mandatory minimums. They required a \$50,000 balance to open an account-based pension.

Both funds have since told CHOICE they would be dropping their minimum balance requirements to \$10,000, but not to zero.

A spokesperson for Australian Super, the largest super fund in the country, says “managing fairness and equity across the fund’s more than 3.5 million members is complex” and that any “cross-subsidy”, where the cost of servicing some members’ accounts are covered by the larger group, needed to be taken into consideration.

They say that having no minimum increased the prospect that retirees could face “meaningful fee erosion” of their savings due to the small account balances.

Hesta says it is confident that reducing the minimum from \$50,000 to \$10,000 “strikes the right balance” of ensuring individual needs of customers are met.

Super funds respond

Since the recently announced changes, the major super fund with the highest minimum balance, at \$30,000, is now Australian Retirement Trust (ART). We sent questions to all the major funds with minimum requirement rules, asking them to justify the minimum. ART did not respond other than to say the policy was “currently under review”.

Several other funds said the practice was an industry norm, something Katrina Ellis, deputy CEO of Super Consumers, says is a poor excuse.

“I don’t think it should be up to the trustees – the super funds – to decide who can move their money into the tax-free retirement phase. People should have the freedom to decide

where they want to put their money and in what type of account as they move into retirement,” she says.

An issue of fairness

David Bell, executive director of The Conexus Institute, says the tax benefits of moving into an account-based pension could be several hundred dollars a year in the pocket of retirees, which is “nothing to sneeze at in a cost-of-living crisis”.

“This industry contains a lot of people who are well paid, and they have to have the perspective of people who are less well off. You’ve got to be careful of making financial judgements about what matters,” he says.

Bell says the fair approach would be for all superannuation funds to adopt a no-minimum-balance

approach to opening an account-based pension.

“We have a view that no Australian should be precluded from accessing an account-based pension. Why should anyone be precluded from it? We don’t think anyone should be denied access to the full taxation benefits of the superannuation system,” he adds.

Super Consumers’ Ellis agrees with the principle.

“Superannuation is complex, too complex, and minimum balances are making an already complex system more difficult at a time when people need to make tough decisions about their retirement,” she says.

“We need to be making it simpler, and getting rid of minimum balances would help do that.” ■

Top 10 super funds: What you need to open an account-based pension

Eight of the top ten superannuation funds* require a minimum amount to open an account-based pension.

Superannuation fund	Minimum amount for an account-based pension
 Australian Retirement Trust	\$30,000
 AustralianSuper	\$10,000
 aware super	\$20,000
 chus	No minimum
 HESTA	\$10,000
 HDF PLUS	\$10,000
 Mercer	\$10,000
 MLC	No minimum
 Rest	\$10,000
 UniSuper	\$25,000

* By number of member accounts



Lost property



THE SUMMER
ISSUE

Knowing what your travel insurance covers if your baggage is lost or delayed can make getting help easier. **Margaret Rafferty** explains

Have you ever found yourself standing at a baggage carousel, watching as all the other passengers claim their luggage and set off on the next part of their journey, all the while growing more anxious as your bag fails to appear? If you have, you'll know the sinking feeling that accompanies the realisation that your bags won't be joining you on your trip.

While it won't make your luggage magically appear, knowing

what you should do if this happens to you can help you feel prepared for the worst.

Before you go

If the thought of losing your luggage makes you break out in a cold sweat, but travel insurance gives you some peace of mind, consider this: basic policies won't generally cover baggage at all.

"To start with, make sure you get a policy that has some cover," says CHOICE travel insurance expert

**Basic policies
won't generally
cover baggage
at all**

NEED TO KNOW

- Check your policy before you go – not all policies include cover for lost baggage.
- Report the loss promptly – you'll need evidence that you reported the loss for your insurance claim.
- It might be many weeks before you get compensation for lost luggage.

Jodi Bird. “Then, you want to check that the overall limit for baggage is enough to cover the items you have packed in your suitcase, and that the sub-item limits are enough.”

Sub-item limits often apply to items such as prescribed medications, cameras and other electronic equipment. For example, if you’re taking a laptop with you, make sure the policy’s laptop limit is high enough to cover your device. You can find this information in the product disclosure statement (PDS) issued with the policy. To see which policies offer coverage for lost baggage (and the total dollar amount of the coverage), see the table on page 40.

It’s also helpful to have evidence that you own the things you are travelling with.

“Receipts are good, but if you don’t have them, take photos of your belongings before you leave,” says Bird.

Is your luggage lost or just delayed?

Sometimes your policy or the airline will provide coverage to help you buy essentials if your luggage is simply delayed rather than lost, but there are restrictions.

If you find your luggage hasn’t made it with you to your holiday destination, but your carrier assures you it’s on its way and will be with you in under 12 hours, you probably won’t be covered. However, if it’s longer than that, you may be covered for essential items like clothing and toiletries until your bags catch up with you. And the point in your trip when the luggage is delayed does make a difference.

“If you arrive in Bali but your luggage doesn’t, the delayed luggage benefit in your travel insurance might cover essential items, but you don’t generally get that benefit for luggage that is delayed on your trip home,” warns Bird. ►

Is there an age limit for travel insurance?

Most insurers do have an age limit, which varies policy to policy. A handful of policies limit cover to just 69 years, but most will cover you until 99 years or beyond 100. This age limit is usually listed in the Product Disclosure Statement (PDS) or on the insurer’s website. We include age limits in our review, which you can find on page 40.

Some insurers limit the length of trip they’ll insure for older people depending on the destination. In most cases, the way to find out what they will cover is by plugging your details into the online quoting system. But, as an example, Tick Travel Insurance lists a complex set of rules in their Target Market Determination about the trips it will insure for different age groups. These include limiting worldwide trips to 35 days for people over

80 years, and limiting trips beyond the Pacific region to 90 days for travellers over 65 years.

It’s also not uncommon for the age limit of an insurer’s single-trip policy to be higher than for their annual multi-trip insurance.

Some policies have additional conditions based on age too. Zoom and 1Cover, for example, charge travellers over 80 years an extra \$3000 excess for medical claims and limit trips to 90 days. But these are the only policies in our review that charge an extra excess.

PassportCard doesn’t have an age limit for its policy, but requires travellers over 85 years to provide a medical certificate declaring them fit for travel. And Tick Travel Insurance’s top plan offers a reduced benefit for accidental death if you’re over 65.





The wait for compensation

Bear in mind that it could be weeks or even months until you get your compensation for lost baggage. Airlines won't generally declare your bag as lost until after 21 days, at which point you'll be able to claim compensation. For many, that will mean your holiday has come and gone while you wait.

If your airline has lost your bags it should offer to compensate you, but how much will depend on whether you're travelling domestically or internationally. If what they pay doesn't cover the full value of the lost items, you could potentially claim the shortfall from your insurer, but it will depend on your policy.

"Insurers will generally only pay out on lost luggage after a carrier deems the luggage irrecoverable. And they'll only compensate you for what the carrier hasn't already," says Bird.

"So the insurer really wants to be sure you won't get your items returned or compensated for by anyone else before they'll pay you."

Be aware of exclusions

Of course, your belongings going missing isn't always an accident – insurance can also help if something is stolen, but you need to be aware of exclusions. Just because you've made it out of the airport with all your luggage doesn't mean you can let your guard down, since many policies have exclusions that can create frustration for the unwary traveller should something go missing while you're on holiday.

DON'T LEAVE ITEMS UNATTENDED

Belongings left unattended is the biggest baggage catch, says Bird. "For example, items left by the side

of the pool when you go for a swim, or hand luggage left on a chair while you get up to buy a coffee, may be considered 'unattended'."

Claims on stolen valuables might also be denied if they are in your checked luggage rather than your carry-on

"The insurer might not pay out for those items if they get stolen while your back is turned."

Claims on stolen valuables, like your jewellery, phone or laptop, might also be denied if they are in your checked luggage rather than your carry-on, or if you leave them in a vehicle (even if it's locked). They also might not be covered if they're stolen from a hotel room and you didn't use a provided safe, or you left doors or windows unlocked. Conditions will vary between policies, so read the PDS carefully.



Things to consider before you buy travel insurance

1 WHERE YOU'RE GOING

The level of cover and the cost of travel insurance can vary depending on the region you're travelling to, and some risks may be of greater concern than others. Not all travel insurance policies cover COVID-19 and other pandemics or epidemics such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

And not all policies cover you for changing your plans due to a riot or civil commotion, for example. Travel insurance also may not be available for countries with travel alerts. Look up your destination on smartraveller.gov.au and make sure you're aware of any risks or safety advice.

Buy a policy that covers you for every country you're travelling to or transiting through. If you're going to Europe via a one-night stopover in the US, then ensure your policy covers the stopover.

Remember that you need different cover for different regions and insurers sometimes apply policies to regions rather than having a policy for each destination:

Asia Pacific: Destinations such as New Zealand, Bali, Fiji and Papua New Guinea.

Asia: Destinations such as India, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia.

Europe: Destinations such as the United Kingdom, Ireland and Western Europe.

Worldwide: All of the above as well as regions such as North America, South America, Japan and Africa.

These definitions differ for each insurer. For example, several insurers cover travel to Bali under their Pacific policy, while some will only cover travel to Bali under their Asian region policy.

2 HOW LONG YOU'RE GOING FOR

Just a quick trip? Simply buy a standalone travel insurance policy for a set number of days.

Travel often? Consider an annual multi-trip policy or a credit card with complimentary travel insurance, but make sure it gives you the cover you need.

Note: Annual multi-trip policies and credit card policies can restrict the length of each trip you take – anywhere from 15 to 365 days depending on your policy. Some allow you to pay for extra days.

3 WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO THERE

Cruising the open road on a moped? Carving up the ski slopes? Partying at a wedding? These things aren't necessarily included in a travel insurance policy.

Scan the insurer's list of included activities and those that you'll have to pay extra for. And take it easy on the grog – if your alcohol or drug intake is the cause of an adverse event, it won't be covered by your policy.

4 TAKING VALUABLE ITEMS

Do you need cover for a digital SLR camera or an expensive tablet or laptop? Cover for such valuables can vary from a few hundred dollars to thousands, and higher cover will often mean a higher premium.

Consider adding cover for portable valuables to your home insurance policy instead, but check on the excess and if the policy will cover you worldwide and not just in Australia.

Policies also vary when it comes to how they cover valuable items. Valuables in your check-in luggage often aren't covered, while cover for baggage stored in your hire car is inconsistent. ▶

Buy a policy that covers you for every country you're travelling to or transiting through



Recommended		PERFORMANCE			SPECIFICATIONS				
		CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Cover score (%)	Price score (%)	Age limit	Medical (\$)	Cancellation (\$)	Baggage (\$)	Cruise cover
✓	Allianz Comprehensive (Allianz)	69	72	65	100+	\$20 million	Cover chosen	10,000	O
✓	Medibank Comprehensive (Zurich)	69	84	47	99	Unlimited	Unlimited	25,000	O
✓	Zoom Comprehensive (Lloyds)	69	61	81	85	Unlimited	Cover chosen	10,000	O
	Webjet Travel Safe Plus International (Zurich)	68	76	55	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	15,000	O
	Worldcare Comprehensive (Allianz)	68	72	62	100+	\$20 million	Cover chosen	10,000	O
	Virgin Australia Travel Safe Plus International (Zurich)	68	76	56	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	15,000	O
	Virgin Australia Travel Safe International (Zurich)	68	60	80	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	0	O
	PassportCard Comprehensive (Guild)	68	76	56	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	25,000	O
	Cover-More Comprehensive (Zurich)	67	77	52	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	15,000	O
	Webjet Travel Safe International (Zurich)	67	60	79	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	0	O
	World2Cover Essentials (Tokio Marine)	67	64	72	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	7500	O
	Worldcare Essential (Allianz)	67	69	64	74	\$20 million	Cover chosen	5000	
	NRMA Comprehensive (Zurich)	67	75	54	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	12,000	O
	AHM Comprehensive (Zurich)	66	79	48	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	15,000	O
	AHM Medical Only (Zurich)	66	51	87	99	Unlimited	0	0	O
	Southern Cross Travel Insurance (SCTI) Comprehensive (Southern Cross)	66	77	49	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	25,000	O
	Tick Travel Insurance Standard (Mitsui Sumitomo)	66	56	80	100	Unlimited	10,000	5000	
	1Cover Comprehensive (Lloyds)	65	62	70	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	15,000	O
	Qantas International Comprehensive (AIG)	65	78	45	100+	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
	RACQ Standard (Tokio Marine)	65	64	66	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	7500	O
	Go Insurance Go Basic (Lloyds)	65	59	75	75	Unlimited	Cover chosen	2500	O
	Tick Travel Insurance Top (Mitsui Sumitomo)	65	59	74	100	Unlimited	20,000	7500	
	RACT Essentials (Tokio Marine)	65	64	66	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	7500	O
	Cover-More Basic (Zurich)	64	65	62	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	5000	O
	Tick Travel Insurance Basic (Mitsui Sumitomo)	64	40	99	69	Unlimited	0	2000	
	NRMA Essentials (Zurich)	64	66	61	99	\$10 million	Cover chosen	5000	O
	Medibank Medical Only (Zurich)	63	51	80	99	Unlimited	0	0	O
	RAA Essentials (Tokio Marine)	63	64	63	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	7500	O
	RAC Essentials (Tokio Marine)	63	64	61	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	7500	O
	RACV Essentials (Tokio Marine)	63	64	63	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	7500	O
	World2Cover Top (Tokio Marine)	63	69	54	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	15,000	O
	Tick Travel Insurance Budget (Mitsui Sumitomo)	63	43	93	79	Unlimited	5000	2500	
	Southern Cross Travel Insurance (SCTI) Medical Only (Southern Cross)	63	43	92	100+	Unlimited	0	0	
	Cover-More Comprehensive Plus (Zurich)	62	81	34	99	Unlimited	Cover chosen	25,000	O
	InsureandGo Gold (Mitsui Sumitomo)	62	65	56	100	Unlimited	Unlimited	15,000	O
	World2Cover Basics (Tokio Marine)	62	45	86	100+	Unlimited	0	2000	O
	InsureandGo Bare Essentials (Mitsui Sumitomo)	61	40	92	79	Unlimited	0	2000	O
	NIB Essentials (NIB)	61	65	54	69	Unlimited	Cover chosen	5000	✓
	Travel Insurance Direct Basics (NIB)	61	63	58	74	Unlimited	Cover chosen	2000	✓
	Go Insurance Go Plus (Lloyds)	61	64	57	75	Unlimited	Cover chosen	7500	O
	Bupa International Plus (Zurich)	61	75	40	100+	Unlimited	Cover chosen	12,000	O

TABLE NOTES We review 78 single-trip travel insurance policies and score them based on their policy cover (how much they cover compared to other products) and how competitive their pricing is (based on thousands of online quotes). We combine these scores to produce the **CHOICE Expert Rating**, a score out of 100 that reflects a policy's level of cover and value for money. Only those that score over 60% are listed in the table. **Price score** The higher the price score, the cheaper the policy is relative to the competitors. **Cover chosen** means you choose the level of cover you want for cancellation. **Cruise cover** O Optional. ■

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CHOICE



Cool beans



Cold brew coffee is a refreshing alternative to your usual hot coffee. And now, says **Rebecca Ciaramidaro**, some home espresso machines are getting in on the action

Move over iced coffee. Cold brew coffee is fast becoming a popular way to get your caffeine fix during the warmer months. Known for its smooth, low-acidity taste profile, cold brew coffee is increasingly turning up on the menu at your local cafe.

We're now seeing some home espresso machines spruiking cold brew settings, with claims they can bring cafe-quality cold brew into the comfort of your own home at the touch of a button. But can a domestic appliance deliver a cafe-quality cold brew?

We don't assess the cold brew settings in our espresso machine

testing, but looked at some machines that offer this feature, and asked our experts if they live up to the hype.

What is cold brew coffee?

Cold brew coffee isn't just a regular coffee shot that's been cooled down, like in an iced coffee. It's created using a totally distinct method of coffee extraction.

To achieve a cold brew, coffee beans need to be coarsely ground. They are then steeped in cold (or room temperature) water for

an extended period of time, typically 12–24 hours.

The grounds are then filtered out using a paper filter, fine mesh sieve or other filtration

method. This process produces a brew that tastes smoother, with less bitterness and acidity than a regular hot espresso.

"A cold brew requires more coffee grounds than what is typically used to make hot espresso. This is so you don't end up with a cold brew that's weak and watery," says CHOICE coffee machine expert Adrian Lini.

Cold brew tastes smoother, with less bitterness and acidity than a regular hot espresso

This also explains why you tend to pay more for this type of coffee at your local cafe.

COLD BREW VS ICED COFFEE

While cold brew and iced coffee are both served cold, the two are quite different drinks in terms of the way they're brewed and the flavour they produce. So if you're expecting a cold brew to taste like an espresso over ice, you might be surprised by the difference.

Iced coffee is made using a hot shot of espresso, but with ice and cold milk added to it to make it refreshingly cool. It still has the bitter and acidic flavour of a hot espresso but without the heat, and some of those flavours are masked by the addition of milk (and in some cases, sugar).

Because of cold brew's comparatively milder flavour, drinkers are less likely to add as much sugar and milk to cut through the bitterness, meaning it may be a lower calorie option for some.

It also has an extended shelf life and can keep for up to two weeks in the fridge. In comparison, regular coffee starts to go stale soon after it's made thanks to an aromatic compound that degrades as it cools.

COLD BREW VS COLD DRIP

Cold drip and cold brew coffee are similar in that they only use cold water and they both take up to 24 hours to make, but they're not the same.

Where making cold brew involves putting all the coffee and water into a vessel at once, cold drip works by slowly releasing the water through the ground coffee, one drip at a time – as the name suggests.

And where espresso machines use pressure from the build-up of steam to force hot water through the ground coffee, cold drip systems rely solely on gravity to move the water.

Cold drip systems tend to be quite elaborate set-ups involving glass piping, and they can be quite expensive, running into the hundreds of dollars.

Espresso machines that make cold brew

If you're a fan of both hot- and cold-brewed coffee, an espresso machine with cold brew functionality could provide the best of both worlds. As coffee culture has expanded to make

cold brew more mainstream, manufacturers have started to add this functionality to their coffee machines, claiming they've created a way to make a cafe-quality cold brew within minutes.

We've noticed these features making their way into more and more machines, and while our expert Adrian Lini doesn't test these settings in our lab test, he says home baristas should not expect cafe-quality cold brews out of an espresso machine. ►

Making cold brew without a machine

If you're keen to make cold brew at home without forking out big bucks for an appliance, all you need are two lidded jars or jugs and a coffee filter.

1. GRIND THE BEANS

Grind your beans on the coarse setting, or ask the roaster or cafe to grind it for cold brew – they'll know what to do. Coffee that's ground too finely can leave sediment in your coffee, which will create a muddy, bitter drink. Lack of sediment is one of the defining characteristics of cold brew and is what gives it that lovely light mouthfeel.

If you only have access to pre-ground beans, don't despair: it'll still work, but you may need to play around with timing and brew it for less time. The smaller the grind, the less time it'll take to steep. If you leave it too long you could end up with bitter coffee.

2. MIX GROUNDS WITH WATER AND STEEP

Mix the ground beans with room-temperature water in a jar. The coffee-to-water ratio can range from 1:4 or 1:8 (you can experiment with this to achieve your desired level of strength and flavour). Stir the water and coffee until it's well combined and leave to steep for 12 to 24 hours.

3. STRAIN, COOL AND ENJOY

Strain the coffee into an empty jar using a coffee paper filter or a fine cloth. You can also use a French press (aka coffee plunger) instead of a filter. Some baristas and home cold brewers like to filter their cold brew multiple times to remove any residual sediment and give it a 'cleaner' flavour.

Cool in the fridge, then dilute with water or milk when you're ready to drink it. Don't drink the straight concentrate – unless you want to be buzzy and jittery all day and into the night! You can store any leftovers in a well-sealed container in the fridge for up to two weeks.



HOW IT WORKS

"These machines offer a quick alternative, making cold brew using a different method from your local barista, so you shouldn't expect the same depth and complexity of flavour," explains Lini.

"Coffee machines make cold brew by pushing room temperature water through the coffee grinds in the group head at a lower pressure than espresso, but it's still much higher and faster than traditional cold brew."

If you're a casual cold brew drinker, what a home espresso machine turns out may be enough for you. But if you're a diehard enthusiast, you might find it subpar.

Lini describes a cold brew from a home espresso machine as tasting "more like a weak room temperature espresso rather than a cold brew".

IS A COLD BREW SETTING WORTH IT?

If you're in the market for an espresso machine, we recommend you buy one that performs well in our tests for the price you're prepared to pay. If it has a cold brew setting as well, that might be something fun to experiment with, but it shouldn't be a deciding factor.

"While the introduction of cold brew settings on home coffee machines sounds like an inviting innovation, it seems to be more of a marketing gimmick than a meaningful feature," says our coffee machine tester Adrian Lini.

For lovers of cold brew, the cold brew setting on a home coffee machine may very well miss the mark and you might be better off looking at a dedicated cold brew coffeemaker. Even simple DIY methods can give more depth of flavour, and they require very little in terms of equipment.

"A true cold brew takes time, something that machines taking mere minutes cannot authentically achieve," says Lini.

Cold brew contenders

Here are some of the semi-automatic machines from our test that have cold brew settings, and that also did well in our regular espresso taste test.



81% DeLonghi La Specialista Touch EC9455

This semi-automatic machine comes with a large touchscreen display. It also features an inbuilt grinder with 15 grind settings and an integrated tamper. It uses what DeLonghi calls "cold extraction technology" to deliver a cold brew in under five minutes. This machine was overall an impressive performer, but the stand out was its very good (espresso) taste-test result. It also took only seven seconds to heat up, meaning you can deliver a cup of coffee quickly.



79% Breville The Barista Touch Impress (BES881)

This machine automatically grinds, doses and tamps. It also has a good digital display. During testing, we ran into issues with the default volume, which was inaccurate and needed some adjustments. However, our taste test produced a very good result (for regular espresso). Breville claims its cold brew is extracted in under three minutes, using lower temperatures to reduce acidic notes while producing a light and smooth flavour profile that's typical of a cold brew.





\$1399

78%

DeLonghi La Specialista Maestro Cold Brew (EC9885)

This machine comes with all the bells and whistles. Its inbuilt grinder has 15 grind settings, so there are plenty of options to get the right grind. It also comes with a “smart tamping station”, so you also don’t have to worry about getting the right tamp. One of its eight pre-set functions is cold brew, using the same “cold extraction” technology as the EC9455 to produce cold brew in under five minutes.



\$699

77%

DeLonghi La Specialista Arte Evo EC9255

Another machine with an inbuilt grinder, it has a pre-set cold brew function, as well as settings for espresso, long black and hot water, where you can tweak the grind, dose, water temperature and extraction time to give you more control over the end result. It takes around five minutes to deliver a cold brew, still a far cry from the 12 to 24 hours that cold brew usually steeps for. The instructions recommend using a grinder setting between 4 and 6.

Taste-testing for coffee machines

We test manual, semi-automatic, capsule and automatic coffee machines in our CHOICE labs (note that we are not including results for automatic machines in this issue). Tester Adrian Lini puts every machine through a range of tests to assess different aspects, including ease of use and frothing milk, but the taste test of the resulting coffee is far and away the biggest component of our CHOICE Expert Rating (the overall score).

For our in-house taste test, we recruit three coffee experts to judge a shot of hot espresso from each machine, checking the colour and thickness of the crema, aroma, flavour, mouthfeel (for example, creaminess or wateriness) and aftertaste.

Since cold brew settings are a relatively new addition to coffee machines, a shot of cold brew isn’t subjected to our expert panel for tasting. But in 2023 we asked 10 CHOICE coffee drinkers to taste

three types of cold brew – from a cafe, a pod machine and a semi-automatic machine – and tell us which they preferred. The general consensus was that the coffee from home machines was more akin to a watered-down espresso than a proper cold brew coffee. However, our taste testers said the semi-automatic machine was slightly better for taste than the cold brew offered by the capsule machine. ▶



Since cold brew settings are relatively new, a shot of cold brew isn’t subjected to our expert panel for tasting

MANUAL AND SEMI-AUTOMATIC MACHINES				PERFORMANCE					SPECIFICATIONS								
Recommended		Type	Price (\$)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Taste test score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Milk frothing score (%)	Coffee temperature consistency score (%)	Adjustable water temperature	Measured heat-up time (min:sec)	Time to froth milk (min:sec)	Water reservoir capacity (L)	Max. stated pressure (bars)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Weight (kg)	Warranty (yr)	Origin
✓	Profitec Pro 300	M	3300	85	90	68	80	100	✓	5:00	0:58	2.8	ns	39 x 26 x 47	18.4	1	Germany
✓	Lelit MaraX PL62X V2 PL62X-AUS	M	3500	84	90	69	80	85	✓	14:09	1:04	2.4	15	36 x 22 x 41	19.5	2	Italy
✓	Profitec Go	M	2299	84	90	68	80	95	✓	6:18	1:10	2.7	12	38 x 21 x 36	13	1	Italy
✓	Sanremo Cube R CL1A1B2A1C	M	4990	84	90	71	80	80	✓	19:10	0:55	1.8	9	37 x 33 x 46	30.2	1	Italy
✓	Lelit Anna PL41TEMD	M	1299	83	90	69	80	70	✓	2:15	1:32	2.4	15	34 x 21 x 26	7.6	2	Italy
✓	Bezzera BZ10	M	3850	82	85	71	80	90		15:00	0:25	2.8	12	38 x 25 x 43	18.8	1	Italy
✓	Breville The Bambino BES450	M	399	82	85	68	80	100		0:04	1:15	1.4	9	30 x 14 x 32	3.9	1	China
✓	Breville The Barista Express BES870	SA	749	82	85	78	80	70	✓	0:45	1:00	2	15	41 x 33 x 31	10.2	1	China
✓	Sunbeam Mini Barista EM4300	SA	329	82	85	74	80	80		0:55	0:45	2	15	33 x 25 x 29	5.1	1	China
✓	Breville The Dual Boiler BES920	SA	1499	81	80	82	80	100	✓	2:40	0:50	2.5	15	38 x 40 x 38	13.7	2	China
✓	DeLonghi La Specialista Touch EC9455	SA	1099	81	85	76	70	80	✓	0:07	1:30	1.8	15	40 x 31 x 37	9.9	2	China
✓	Sunbeam Barista Max EM5300	SA	649	81	85	78	80	40	✓	1:02	1:15	2.8	15	41 x 32 x 35	7.9	1	China
✓	Sunbeam Origins EMM7300	SA	1095	81	85	78	80	50	✓	1:07	1:35	2.8	15	36 x 30 x 33	10.5	1	China
	Breville The Barista Express Impress BES876 BSS	SA	899	79	80	82	80	60	✓	0:42	1:35	2	9	42 x 31 x 31	11.1	2	China
	Breville The Barista Touch Impress BES881	SA	1999	79	80	76	80	75	✓	0:15	1:21	2.1	9	42 x 36 x 33	10.5	2	China
	Expobar Office SA	M	1899	79	75	72	100	100		4:10	0:25	2.8	ns	38 x 24 x 45	17.4	ns	Spain
	Gaggia Classic Evo Pro R19481	M	999	79	85	68	70	80		1:40	1:12	2.1	15	36 x 20 x 26	7.1	2	Italy
	DeLonghi La Specialista Maestro Cold Brew EC9885	SA	1399	78	80	70	80	75	✓	0:20	0:32	2.5	19	47 x 41 x 35	14.8	2	China
	Smeg 50s Style Espresso Machine with Grinder EGF03	SA	1349	78	80	76	80	60	✓	1:18	1:13	2.6	20	44 x 32 x 31	11.2	2	China
	Breville The Barista Pro BES878BSS4JAN1	SA	1049	77	75	78	80	80	✓	0:04	0:48	2	ns	41 x 36 x 34	8.9	2	China
	DeLonghi La Specialista Arte Evo EC9255	SA	699	77	75	78	80	80	✓	0:27	1:08	1.8	15	40 x 28 x 37	9.4	2	China
	Breville The Oracle Touch BES990BSS	SA	3399	76	70	86	80	90	✓	4:30	0:52	2.5	9	45 x 39 x 38	15.7	2	China
	Rocket Appartamento	M	3399	76	80	66	80	50		10:34	0:25	1.8	3	33 x 27 x 43	22.4	1	Italy
	Sunbeam Cafe Series Duo EMM7200	M/SA	979	76	75	74	80	80	✓	1:04	1:15	3.6	15	35 x 31 x 36	10.2	1	China
	Sunbeam Compact Barista EMM2900SS	SA	279	76	75	72	80	90		0:40	1:24	1	15	31 x 14 x 31	3.5	1	China
	VBM Domobar Junior Digital	M	3299	75	80	68	80	20	✓	5:37	0:35	1.6	ns	42 x 25 x 43	20.6	1	Italy
	Breville Bambino Plus BES500	SA	549	74	75	66	80	70		0:04	0:45	1.8	9	31 x 19 x 36	5	2	China
	Breville The Oracle Jet BES985	SA	3499	74	70	82	80	75	✓	0:15	1:24	2.2	9	43 x 36 x 38	13	2	China
	DeLonghi Dedica Arte EC885	SA	199	74	75	70	70	90	✓	0:34	1:25	1.1	15	31 x 15 x 33	3.9	2	China
	Breville The Barista Touch BES880	SA	1499	73	75	74	70	50	✓	0:03	0:53	2	ns	41 x 32 x 32	9.4	2	China
	Sunbeam Origins Sense EMM6500GR	SA	999	73	75	76	70	50	✓	0:43	1:28	1.8	15	40 x 28 x 30	7.5	1	China
	Aldi Stirling Premium With Grinder STR-E15BGD	SA	399	71	70	72	80	50	✓	0:38	0:55	2.3	15	41 x 32 x 32	7.8	3	China
	Breville The Infuser BES840	SA	899	71	70	74	80	50	✓	0:39	1:17	1.8	15	34 x 26 x 31	7.1	1	China
	DeLonghi La Specialista Opera EC9555	SA	849	71	70	70	80	60	✓	0:23	1:05	2.1	19	45 x 37 x 35	13.1	2	China
	Crem One Single Boiler (1B) PID	M	3685	70	70	69	80	50	✓	5:15	0:30	1.7	1.2	41 x 30 x 46	21.9	1	China
	Rancilio Miss Silvia V6	M	1399	70	70	60	80	75		2:46	1:00	2.2	15	35 x 23 x 30	11.8	1	Italy
	Sunbeam Origins Classic EMM5500BK	SA	829	70	70	76	70	50	✓	1:03	1:30	1.8	15	40 x 28 x 30	7.4	1	China

POD / CAPSULE MACHINES			PERFORMANCE					SPECIFICATIONS								
Recommended		Price (\$)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Taste test score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Milk frothing score (%)	Coffee temperature consistency score (%)	Adjustable water temperature	Measured heat-up time (min:sec)	Time to froth milk (min:sec)	Water reservoir capacity (L)	Max. stated pressure (bars)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Weight (kg)	Warranty (yr)	Origin
✓	Lavazza Desea LM950 Coffee Machine	349	76	75	84	70	70	✓	0:28	1:05	1.1	ns	27 x 13 x 38	4.2	2	China
✓	Smeg Lavazza A Modo Mio LM200	349	73	70	84	80	40		0:30	2:06	0.9	ns	28 x 15 x 36	4.2	2	China
✓	DeLonghi Nespresso Lattissima One EN510.B	449	72	70	84	70	60		0:18	0:57	1	19	25 x 15 x 32	4.7	2	Italy
	Lavazza A Modo Mio Tiny Eco LM 840	119	72	65	78	80	100		0:19	2:06	0.5	ns	28 x 13 x 26	2.5	1	Malaysia
✓	DeLonghi Nespresso Vertuo Next & Aeroccino 3 ENV120WAE	389	71	70	84	60	60		0:23	1:28	1.1	ns	32 x 14 x 43	4.3	2	Hungary
	Breville Nespresso Creatista Plus BNE800BSS	949	70	65	80	80	60		0:03	1:05	1.5	19	31 x 17 x 41	5.2	2	China
	DeLonghi Nespresso Citiz & Milk EN267.BAE	349	67	65	84	60	50		0:21	1:20	1	19	28 x 22 x 37	3.9	2	China
	DeLonghi Nespresso Inissia EN80BAE	259	67	65	84	60	40		0:27	1:12	0.7	19	23 x 12 x 31	2.4	2	Ukraine
	Breville Nespresso Creatista Uno BNE500	699	66	65	86	60	10		0:05	0:48	1.5	19	31 x 17 x 41	4.5	2	China
	Breville Nespresso Creatista Pro BNE900BSS4JAN1	1399	65	55	82	80	70		0:05	1:15	2	19	33 x 20 x 44	6.4	2	China
	Aldi Expressi Multi-Beverage Capsule Machine EXP-19CCMB	79	63	60	80	60	45		0:37	1:25	0.7	19	23 x 12 x 30	2.5	2	China
	DeLonghi Nespresso Pixie Capsule Coffee Machine with Aeroccino EN127.SAE	299	62	55	84	60	55		0:39	1:35	0.9	19	24 x 11 x 32	2.5	2	Switzerland
	DeLonghi Nespresso Gran Lattissima EN640.B	699	62	55	84	70	30		0:33	0:35	1.3	19	27 x 21 x 37	4.9	2	Italy
	DeLonghi Nespresso Vertuo Lattissima ENV300B	699	62	55	84	60	60		1:21	1:58	1.7	ns	32 x 17 x 40	7.1	1	Hungary
	Breville Nespresso Vertuo Pop + Aeroccino 3 Bundle BNV150	319	61	50	83	60	100		0:20	2:10	0.6	ns	25 x 13 x 43	3.5	2	Hungary
	Breville Nespresso Essenza Mini Bundle BEC250BLK	309	60	50	84	70	60		0:25	1:19	0.6	19	21 x 8 x 32	2.3	2	Ukraine
	Breville Nespresso Essenza Mini Capsule Machine BEC220	219	60	50	84	70	60		0:25	1:19	0.6	19	21 x 8 x 32	2.3	2	Ukraine
	Breville Nespresso Vertuo Creatista BVE850	1099	60	50	82	70	70	✓	1:05	1:25	1.9	ns	32 x 23 x 42	6.5	2	Hungary
	Nespresso Vertuo Pop+ Coffee Machine Starter Kit GDV6	379	56	45	86	60	50		0:23	1:40	1.1	ns	27 x 22 x 35	3.7	2	Hungary



TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend manual and semi-automatic machines with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 80%, and capsule machines with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 70%, as long as they score at least 70% in the taste test and 54% for milk frothing. **Price** RRP as of October 2025. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of the taste test (60%), ease of use (20%), milk frothing (15%) and coffee temperature consistency (5%). **Type SA** Semi-Automatic (will automatically cut off the flow of coffee once a pre-set amount has been poured into the cup), **M** Manual (requires you to cut off the flow yourself). **ns** Not stated. ■

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Aldi	D
Breville	C
DeLonghi	C
Gaggia	C
Kmart	C
Lavazza	B
Nespresso	F
Smeg Lavazza	B
Sunbeam	D

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

IMAGE: GETTY



The best bar none

Need a new fridge that can hold up to the demands of the silly season?

Grace Smith and Ashley Iredale can help

If you're planning on doing your fair share of entertaining over the Christmas period and summer holidays, then you'll need to make sure your fridge (or fridges) are up to the task. After all, it's no good having mountains of cold cuts, platters of freshly sliced fruit and slabs of drinks if you can't keep them nicely chilled for your guests.

If your main fridge is struggling to keep up with the extra load, the frequent door openings and the increased temperatures of the summer holidays, it might be time to

think about replacing it. But if you're happy with your fridge and just looking for something a little extra, maybe to keep drinks cold out near the barbecue, or in the downstairs

rec room, you might be considering adding a bar fridge to your home.

We've included bar fridges in our test for the first time to give you an idea of which models are worth considering.

Spoiler: most of them perform much worse than

full-sized fridges, although one model delivered a good performance.

And while bar fridges can definitely be handy for some situations, fridge

expert Denis Gallagher recommends that people who own a large capacity French-door fridge should consider if they really need to add an extra appliance to their home.

"Many of the latest French-door models allow you to change the bottom section of the fridge to be a freezer, a fridge or even chiller, so you may want to check out your existing fridge to see if it can pull double duty during the festive season instead of adding an extra fridge to your household," he suggests.

"If you're just looking for a way to keep extra drinks chilled during big events, you can also use an esky, bucket or sink filled with ice for a cheaper alternative."

For the first time ever, we've included bar fridges in our testing

Pros and cons of bar fridges

PROS

- Cheapest fridge type.
- Versatile installation options (can take up about the same amount of space as a dishwasher).
- Easy to turn on and off when you occasionally need more fridge space – such as when cooking for large family gatherings.

CONS

- Inefficient performance compared to other fridge types in our test.
- Most bar fridges only have a tiny freezer area that shouldn't be considered anything more than a soft freezer.

See
our test
results for bar
fridges on p51
and full-size
fridges on
p52

BEST BAR FRIDGE



72%

Hisense HRBF46

Volume: 45L

\$229

The top-scoring bar fridge from our review also happened to be the cheapest (and it also had the lowest running costs), which is good news for people watching their wallets

at this time of year. While none of the bar fridges we tested scored well enough to be recommended, this is the model that came the closest. It was decent at keeping food fresh and excellent for temperature stability, meaning the temps in the fridge didn't fluctuate much over time. But it underperformed significantly for temperature evenness, with different areas of the fridge clocking different temperatures, meaning you're likely to experience some warm spots. It was also no good at responding to changes to the outside temperature, although this could be remedied by adjusting the temperature dial yourself. All in all, this could be a handy fridge for keeping drinks, snacks and refrigerated condiments cool somewhere outside your kitchen – we just wouldn't recommend storing your fresh produce here long-term. ▶



How to store Christmas leftovers

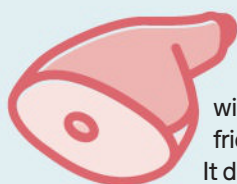
With great holiday feasts inevitably comes the great quantities of leftovers. While having a good fridge is a good start, if you want your leftovers to last the distance (and not make you sick), you need to make sure you're storing them correctly. Here's a handy guide for some of the leftovers you might have.



COOKED CHICKEN

Chicken leftovers can last three to four days in the fridge in an airtight container, or up to six months in the freezer. And yes, if it was frozen before you cooked it, you can freeze it again once it's cooked.

Whether frozen or just refrigerated, make sure you heat leftover chicken to 70 degrees or higher to kill off any bacteria, and never reheat it more than once.



HAM

How long your ham will last in the fridge will vary. It depends on whether it's cooked or uncooked, and sliced or whole.

Uncooked whole ham

You should use refrigerated uncooked whole ham within three days, or within five days if it's in a sealed package. If it's in the freezer, use it within six months.

Cooked whole ham

Cooked whole ham will last a little longer in the fridge – between one and two weeks, and up to three months in a sealed package (or until the use-by date, whichever comes first). A whole cooked ham can be stored in the freezer for up to three months.

You should consume ready-to-eat slices within five days, or within

a month if they're in a sealed package or kept in the freezer. Whatever the type of ham, eat it as soon as possible after thawing.

Ham needs to be able to breathe when it's refrigerated, but it's important to keep it moist. Loosely wrap ham on the bone in a tea towel, pillowcase, piece of calico or a purpose-made ham bag, seasoned with diluted vinegar – this will keep it from drying out in the fridge, although you'll need to re-season the cloth every few days.

If you've got more ham than you can get through in two weeks, carve some chunks off, wrap them tightly, and freeze them.

Sliced ham should be stored in an airtight container that's lined with paper towel. Replace the paper towel when it becomes damp.



WINE

Once opened, wine has a very short life, but you can extend it a little by keeping it in the fridge – tightly stoppered, of course. Aim to finish the bottle off within about three days or the taste will begin to spoil.

If you've got more bottles of open wine left over after Christmas dinner than you know what to do with, you can freeze some of it for use in recipes later down the track, to avoid wasting it. First, pour the leftovers into an ice cube tray. Then, once it's frozen – be patient, it may take longer than you think because of the alcohol content – tip it into a ziplock bag. It will then be ready for your next culinary adventure, or even for chilling a glass of a similar varietal without diluting it.



COOKED EGGS

If your Auntie Deb served up an epic spread of devilled eggs for Christmas lunch and you want to keep the leftovers, you're probably out of luck. Eggs that have been at room temperature

for between two and four hours are safe to eat immediately, but they shouldn't be stored – even in a fridge – because of the increased risk of bacterial growth and salmonella poisoning. That goes for salads with eggs in them too – if they sat out on the table for a few hours over lunch, it's safest to just toss them rather than risk spending New Years slumped over a toilet bowl.



CHEESE

If you've served up a cheese platter and you've got some significant chunks of good quality cheese left over, you can absolutely save them for a delicious snack, depending on the type. Soft and semi-soft cheeses, such as brie and camembert, carry a higher risk of listeria infection, so if they've been out of your fridge for more than a couple of hours, they should be tossed. Hard cheeses, however, can be placed back in your fridge and saved for another day.

Storing cheese in a dedicated cheese keeper will keep it closer to serving temperature. The cover also means your cheese is less likely to pick up odours from the rest of the fridge (or make everything else in your fridge smell of cheese). That said, the slightly warmer temperatures mean your cheese won't last as long. So if you're not going to eat it straight away, keep your cheese in the main fridge compartment, where it's cooler.

Because cheese absorbs odours, it's important to keep it covered, but cling wrap can cause cheese to sweat. Instead, keep it wrapped in the special paper it came in, or failing that, baking paper, as this will allow the cheese to breathe a bit better.



BAR FRIDGES		COSTS		PERFORMANCE								SPECIFICATIONS				
Recommended		Price (\$)	10-year running cost (\$)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Keep food fresh longer score (%)	Temperature stability score (%)	Heat load processing score (%)	Temperature evenness score (%)	Response to outside temperature score (%)	Default setting score (%)	Brand reliability score (%)	Claimed energy use (kWh/yr)	Frozen compartment	Crisper drawer(s)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Claimed total volume (L)
	Hisense HRBF46	229	320	72	65	90	85	55	41	85	81	80	✓	0	50 x 45 x 47	45
	Westinghouse WIM1000WD	399	440	67	54	90	95	40	21	85	83	110	(C)	1	85 x 48 x 45	94
	Chiq CSR125DB	299	484	63	66	90	65	50	51	na	na	121	✓	1	85 x 49 x 55	125
	Chiq CSR089DB	289	524	62	58	90	70	45	29	45	na	131	✓	1	83 x 47 x 45	90
	Hisense HRBF126	279	440	62	56	75	75	45	41	70	81	110	✓	1	84 x 48 x 56	124
	Westinghouse WIM1200WD	499	604	57	59	67	60	55	53	0	83	151	✓	1	85 x 56 x 58	120
	Esatto EBF91S	289	828	21	25	14	55	35	28	10	na	207	✓	1	84 x 47 x 49	87

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Bosch	C
Chiq	F
Electrolux	C
Essatto	B
Fisher & Paykel	F
Hisense	F
Ikea	D
LG	D
Mitsubishi	F
Samsung	C
Westinghouse	C

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

TABLE NOTES **Recommended** We recommend bar and full-size fridges (see next page for full-size fridge results) with a CHOICE Expert Rating of at least 75%, and at least 60% for all aspects of temperature performance except default setting score. **Price** Recommended retail, as of October 2025. Many fridges are available in other styles and finishes, at a different price. Some can also be built into cabinets with a door kit that matches your kitchen cupboards. **10-year running costs** are calculated at a rate of 40c/kWh based on the claimed energy usage. A 10-year period gives a useful indication of the long-term differences between high and low energy use – and you should expect your fridge to last at least this long. **CHOICE Expert Rating** Made up of temperature stability (30%), heat load (25%) (for fridge registered to the latest Australian Standard), temperature range (25%) (for fridges registered to the previous Australian Standard), temperature evenness (20%), response to outside temperature (20%) and default setting (5%). **Keep food fresh longer** is made up of three elements which impact how well a fridge will keep your food – temperature stability (40%), temperature evenness (30%) and response to outside temperature (30%). **Brand reliability scores** are taken from our fridge brand reliability survey 2023, and don't affect the overall score. These scores refer to brands, not particular models. **Freezer position** T Top, B Bottom, L Left, C Chest. **Claimed total volume** is all chilled space inside the fridge, including behind trim and in ducts. Net volume, or usable space, is smaller. **(A)** Failed energy check. **(B)** Fridge only. **(C)** Claims to have a chiller. **na** Not available. **nt** Not tested. ▶

FRIDGES			COSTS		PERFORMANCE										SPECIFICATIONS						
	Recommended		Price (\$)	10-year running cost (\$)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Keep food fresh longer score (%)	Temperature stability score (%)	Heat load processing score (%)	Temperature range score (%)	Temperature evenness score (%)	Response to outside temperature score (%)	Default setting score (%)	Brand reliability score (%)	Claimed energy use (kWh/yr)	French door	Freezer position	Chiller	Dairy compartment	Crisper drawer(s)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Claimed total volume (L)
< 300	✓	Husky HUS-198CHE.1	699	432	81	75	82	95	nt	60	80	85	na	108		C	✓	0	85 x 82 x 55	198	
	✓	Hisense HRVF240	899	1116	78	78	75	80	nt	85	75	60	81	279		(B)		3	172 x 59 x 59	240	
		LG GT-2S	799	1080	68	68	64	65	nt	70	72	85	81	270		T		1	168 x 56 x 64	266	
		LG GT-1S	649	1060	66	66	64	65	nt	65	70	80	81	265		T		1	157 x 56 x 64	243	
		Hisense HRTF206S	599	784	62	53	64	85	nt	50	40	75	81	196		T		1	146 x 55 x 56	205	
300–380L	✓	Bosch KSV33VI3A	2199	716	76	73	67	85	nt	65	90	70	na	179		(B)		✓	1	176 x 60 x 65	326
		Samsung SRL334NMB	1099	1392	74	70	60	nt	85	65	88	80	82	348		B		1	170 x 60 x 67	310	
		LG GB-B300PL	999	1172	73	72	71	75	nt	65	80	70	81	293		B		1	172 x 60 x 72	335	
		Westinghouse WTM3100SL	1149	1164	73	71	67	75	nt	75	72	85	83	291		T		1	165 x 60 x 65	312	
		Bosch KGN36VI3AA	1949	1416	72	80	80	nt	55	80	81	50	na	354 (A)		B	✓	3	186 x 60 x 66	351	
		LG GB-V300MBL	1599	1308	72	68	71	85	nt	60	73	50	81	327		B		2	172 x 60 x 72	340	
381–450L	✓	Electrolux EBE4302SD	1949	928	81	81	90	85	nt	65	86	85	80	232		B		✓	1	173 x 70 x 72	425
	✓	LG GF-V500MBLC	1199	1200	81	79	90	nt	85	70	73	85	81	300		B		1	172 x 70 x 70	420	
		Chiq CBM395NBS6E	1099	892	79	75	59	95	nt	80	90	70	na	223		B		2	172 x 70 x 70	396	
	✓	LG GF-V500MBLC	2349	1380	79	76	64	90	nt	85	83	75	89	345		B	✓	1	172 x 70 x 72	421	
	✓	LG GP-R386MBL	1999	648	77	74	67	85	nt	75	82	80	81	162		(B)		2	186 x 60 x 71	386	
		Mitsubishi MR-HS421EX-SDS-A	1599	1380	77	73	59	90	nt	85	80	75	89	345		B	✓	1	172 x 70 x 72	421	
		Westinghouse WBE4302WC	1249	1168	76	76	86	80	nt	50	87	50	83	292		B		✓	1	173 x 70 x 73	425
451–525L	✓	Electrolux EBE5007BD	2299	1016	82	83	90	80	nt	70	85	85	80	254		B		✓	1	173 x 80 x 77	496
	✓	Fisher & Paykel RF522ADX5	2199	1648	80	78	70	nt	85	85	82	85	84	412	✓	B		✓	1	172 x 79 x 70	519
		LG GB-455UPL	999	1560	80	75	85	nt	90	50	86	90	81	390		B		1	172 x 70 x 70	454	
	✓	Westinghouse WHE5204SC	2599	1452	80	80	86	85	nt	65	88	50	83	363	✓	B		✓	1	173 x 80 x 77	491
	✓	LG GF-V500MBLC	3499	2000	79	79	78	80	nt	70	89	75	81	500	✓	B		2	179 x 84 x 73	508	
		Westinghouse WBE5300SC	1699	1236	78	78	90	80	nt	55	85	55	83	309		B		✓	1	173 x 80 x 73	496
	✓	Westinghouse WHE5264SC	2899	1452	76	77	90	70	nt	65	72	85	83	363	✓	B		✓	1	173 x 80 x 77	491
>525L	✓	LG GF-B530BL	2199	1676	87	86	90	90	nt	80	88	80	81	419	✓	B		2	179 x 84 x 74	530	
	✓	LG GF-B505MBL	2199	1360	82	83	86	80	nt	80	83	75	81	340	✓	B		2	179 x 84 x 73	530	
	✓	Samsung SRF7500BB	3799	2088	82	79	78	90	nt	75	85	85	82	522	✓	B		2	178 x 91 x 72	648	
	✓	Electrolux EHE6899BA	3299	2240	80	78	85	nt	85	65	81	80	80	560	✓	B	✓	✓	2	178 x 92 x 75	681
	✓	LG GF-L700MBL	3799	2080	80	78	71	85	nt	80	86	75	81	520	✓	B		2	180 x 92 x 73	637	
	✓	Westinghouse WQE6000SB	2899	1760	80	76	90	nt	90	60	74	65	83	440	✓	B		✓	2	173 x 90 x 79	600
	✓	Westinghouse WHE6170SB	3299	1940	78	77	78	85	nt	70	81	70	83	485	✓	B	✓	✓	2	179 x 92 x 82	609
	✓	Samsung SRF7100S	2999	2088	77	77	71	85	nt	75	87	40	82	522	✓	B		2	178 x 91 x 72	649	
	✓	Samsung SRF9400BFH	5099	2276	77	79	71	75	nt	80	88	65	82	569	✓	B	✓	2	183 x 91 x 72	636	
	✓	Hisense HRCD610TS	1699	2168	75	74	60	80	nt	75	90	70	81	542	✓	B	✓	2	179 x 92 x 73	609	
	✓	Mitsubishi MR-LA580ER-GBK-A	3849	1692	75	70	71	85	nt	65	75	80	89	423	✓	B		✓	3	170 x 95 x 77	580
	✓	Fisher & Paykel RF730QNUVX1	4799	1852	74	72	64	80	nt	80	75	75	84	463	✓	B		3	190 x 91 x 75	690	
	SIDE BY SIDE	✓	LG GS-B599PLB	1799	1408	83	84	90	80	nt	70	90	70	81	352		L		2	179 x 91 x 74	664
		LG GS-V600MBLC	2899	2200	74	73	78	75	nt	50	89	80	81	550		L		2	179 x 91 x 74	635	
		Samsung SRS6300B	2599	1800	71	71	59	70	nt	75	84	80	82	450		L		2	179 x 91 x 72	634	
		Samsung SRS6500BA	2999	1800	70	68	60	75	nt	70	78	65	82	450		L		2	179 x 91 x 72	615	



Cool moves

Need to keep your cool without being tied down?
Pru Engel explains how a portable air conditioner can help

With summer here, you might be thinking about ditching the pedestal fan and getting serious about cooling. If you own your own home and can afford the upfront installation costs, reverse-cycle air conditioning is the most effective and efficient way to cool your home in summer and heat your home in winter. But if you rent, don't have the budget for an expensive built-in air-conditioning system, or simply want the flexibility of moving your air con between rooms, a portable air conditioner can be a good option.

CHOICE experts regularly review portable air conditioners, assessing key factors such as cooling performance, running costs and noise levels. We've found some

impressive performers (both cheap and expensive), but also some disappointing duds – sometimes from the same manufacturers, so it's important to check our reviews before buying.

How portable air con works

Portable air conditioners work basically the same way as built-in air conditioning: they suck in warm and humid air, cool and dehumidify it, then blow it back into the room. Heat is vented out of the room through a duct that connects the portable air conditioner to a window. They typically come with a venting or window kit designed to

seal the gap around the air duct to prevent cool air from escaping.

While portable air conditioners can be effective at cooling small spaces, their efficiency is limited by the way they operate. Venting the hot air outside through the duct results in lower air pressure in the room, so

more warm air is drawn in from the rest of the house. This results in a continual struggle to maintain a cool temperature.

Portable air conditioners condense water from the air during operation, which is typically collected in a tank or drained through a tube.

Many models reuse this water to enhance cooling efficiency, which reduces both energy consumption ►

While physical size is a factor, the more important size to consider is cooling capacity



and the need to frequently empty the tank. The drier air produced not only feels more comfortable but also improves the cooling effect.

We've put together a list of ten things to consider if you're shopping for a portable air conditioner.

1 Size vs capacity

While the physical size of the unit is a factor, the more important 'size' is the cooling capacity. This is measured in kW (kilowatts). For every extra kW, you'll have more cooling power, but it's also going to cost you more in energy. Portable air conditioners are quite inefficient, giving you less cooling for your kilowatt than full-sized reverse-cycle air conditioners.

Each kW of cooling capacity is roughly equivalent to 6m², so you can base your purchase on this requirement. For a small bedroom, you'll need one that is 2.0–2.5kW.

2 Ongoing costs

Think about more than the price tag. You might pick up a cheap deal, but it's no good if that appliance will

cost you a fortune to operate over its lifetime. We calculate the approximate cost of operating the unit at maximum capacity for four hours per day over three months in hot weather, based on 40c/kWh. Some units could add a whopping \$250 or more to your electricity bill during this time.

You can see the running costs for each model in the table on page 56.

3 Proximity to a window

Portable air conditioners are bulky appliances that aren't exactly aesthetically pleasing. Most models also require a window vent, so you need suitable windows and enough space to place the unit where it can also reach a power point.

4 Power cord

Make sure you get a unit with a long enough power cord to reach the outlet. Some cords may be too short for your set-up. Manufacturers don't recommend using an extension cord with your portable air conditioner. User manuals will typically advise against it and claim that doing so will

void your warranty. This is because portable air conditioners are relatively power hungry and your extension cord may not be able to cope, posing an overheating or fire risk.

5 Controls and timers

Just like your TV, a remote control for your air conditioner can be handy for turning it on and off and checking or adjusting the temperature. Most portable models also allow you to set automatic modes and timers so you can program the unit to turn on or off at certain times – for instance, to cool the place down before you get home from work. Sleep timers can switch the unit off after a set period so it doesn't run all night, or adjust the temperature to a comfortable level for sleeping so the air conditioner runs more quietly and doesn't work harder than it needs to.

WI-FI

Some newer models let you control the appliance through an app or even a smart speaker. These features may be useful if you need to turn the unit on or off when you aren't home.

OPERATING MODES

Consider whether you need added features. Some models are reverse-cycle, offering heating as well as cooling (note we don't test portable air conditioners in heating mode).

All portable air conditioners dehumidify as well. Some advertise this as a selling point, but the truth is they all do it, as do full-sized reverse cycle air conditioners. The amount they can dehumidify ranges from 22–80 litres of water a day.

Most models can also be used in fan-only mode, and an automatic or 'smart' mode means the unit can be set for a target temperature and will switch to cooling mode (or heating for reverse-cycle models) as required.

6 How portable is it?

Portable air conditioners are heavy – sometimes weighing over

40kg – and not always easy to manoeuvre. If you'll be moving the portable air conditioner from room to room, look for easy-to-access handles and good clearance between the floor and the bottom of the unit. Smaller wheels on dense carpet can be a nuisance.

7 Noise

Portable air conditioners are noisier indoors than most split-systems (which have their noisiest part, the compressor, outside). The noise level of a portable air conditioner running on high can range from 55–69dB. Normal conversation is about 65dB, so that can be distracting if you're watching TV or listening to music.

8 Energy rating

New portable air conditioners are required to display an energy

rating label, but single-duct (one-hose) portable air conditioners, such as the ones we review, generally have no stars because they aren't all that energy-efficient.

Since April 2020, portable air conditioners have also been required to meet Minimum Energy Performance Standards (MEPS) and display a 'zoned' energy rating label. This shows energy efficiency according to your location, as well as other things such as how noisy it is, kWh use each year and cooling capacity. These labels offer some idea of how much energy your portable air conditioner might use over time, especially if you're in a humid region.

9 How long will it last?

Unfortunately, most portable air conditioner manufacturers seem to have low confidence in their

products. Most don't offer more than a two-year warranty, with a few offering a three-year warranty. Of course, regardless of when your warranty is over, you are covered by the Australian Consumer Law for a reasonable amount of time.

10 How much should you spend?

As a guide, the portable air conditioners we reviewed most recently ranged between \$229 and \$1199, but as with all appliances, a higher price tag doesn't always guarantee better performance.

Portable air conditioner prices vary wildly depending on the retailer and season. We notice that prices jump by at least 10% and sometimes up to a few hundred dollars in the first few days of warm weather each year, as retailers gear up for consumers to spend. ►

Some advertise dehumidification as a selling point, but the truth is they all have it

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Aldi Sterling	D
DeLonghi	C
Dimplex	B
EWT	B
Midea	D
Omega Altise	B
Polo	B
Rinnai	B
TCL	F
Teco	B

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

		COSTS		PERFORMANCE				SPECIFICATIONS										
Recommended		Price (\$)	Running costs (\$)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Cooling score (%)	Energy efficiency score (%)	Noise (dBA)	Type	Remote control	Cooling capacity (W)	Recommended room size (m²)	Wi-Fi app	Heating mode	Fan speeds	Automatic oscillating louvres	Weight (kg)	Dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Warranty (yr)
✓	DeLonghi PAC EL112 CST WIFI	849	137	73	79	67	62.9	C	✓	2900	46	✓		3	✓	33	75 x 45 x 41	2
	Bonaire PRC6000026	419	137	60	57	63	63.2	C	✓	2600	7.7–18			2		21	69 x 33 x 28	2
	Polo PQ10CWF	869	144	59	54	63	57	C	✓	2700	12–20	✓		2	✓	31.1	78 x 46 x 38	2
	TCL TAC-09CPB/MZ	549	141	59	54	63	64	C	✓	2640	ns			2		26	69 x 42 x 36	3
	Teco TPO41CFWUDT	949	219	59	54	63	64	C	✓	4100	ns	✓		3	✓	34	75 x 45 x 40	2
	Bonaire PRC6000141	680	216	58	52	63	64.3	RC	✓	4000	21–27	✓	✓	3	✓	30.5	71 x 44 x 34	2
	DeLonghi PAC EM82K	849	130	58	52	63	62.7	C	✓	2400	80			3	✓	31.5	70 x 43 x 35	2
	Olimpia Splendid Procool 16E 2098	1199	252	58	52	63	63.5	C	✓	4680	ns			3		32	78 x 48 x 39	3
	Aldi Stirling PA09W1	229	49	57	51	62	54.9	C	✓	900	5–8			2		14.5	58 x 27 x 27	3
	Midea MPPD40C	899	217	57	51	62	63.5	C		4000	17–35			3	✓	34	77 x 47 x 40	1
	DeLonghi PAC EL110 ERF WIFI	1154	158	56	50	62	63.6	C	✓	2900	110	✓		3	✓	33	75 x 45 x 41	2
	DeLonghi PAC ES72 CLASSIC	749	115	56	49	62	64.4	C	✓	2100	60			3	✓	25.5	69 x 36 x 30	2
	Midea MPPD33H	699	184	56	50	62	64.5	RC		3378	16–23		✓	3		37	77 x 47 x 40	1
	Olimpia Splendid Elite 16	999	251	56	50	62	64.8	C	✓	4600	15			3		34	75 x 45 x 40	3
	Omega Altise OAPC36RW	949	192	56	50	62	64.4	RC	✓	3517	ns		✓	3		30	76 x 47 x 35	3
	Omega Altise OAPC41W	949	225	56	49	62	64.5	C	✓	4100	12+			3	✓	31	76 x 47 x 35	3
	Omega Altise OAPC9W	599	145	56	49	62	63.5	C	✓	2637	8+			2		23	70 x 32 x 31	3
	Teco TPO26CFWAO	599	145	56	49	62	63.5	C	✓	2637	ns	✓		2		22.5	70 x 32 x 31	2
	Teco TPO46CFWAT	1099	251	56	50	62	64.8	C	✓	4600	ns	✓		3	✓	36	75 x 45 x 40	2
	Aldi Stirling PA15W1	249	83	55	48	62	63.1	C	✓	1500	10			2		ns	ns	3
	DeLonghi PAC EM93K SILENT	899	144	55	47	62	62.7	C	✓	2600	90			3	✓	30	70 x 43 x 35	2
	Dimplex DCP9C	700	144	55	47	62	64.9	C	✓	2600	9–20			2		20.8	68 x 29 x 28	2
	Excelair EPA58034BS	699	188	55	47	62	65	C	✓	3400	13	✓		3	✓	31	79 x 42 x 42	2
	Excelair EPA58041BG	999	227	55	47	62	63.9	C	✓	4100	15	✓		3	✓	31.5	79 x 42 x 42	2
	Excelair EPA58041BS	999	227	55	47	62	63.9	C	✓	4100	15	✓		3	✓	31.5	79 x 42 x 42	2
	Excelair EPA58041RWB	1099	227	55	47	62	62.9	RC	✓	4100	15	✓	✓	3	✓	31.5	79 x 42 x 42	2
	Excelair EPA58041WB	999	227	55	47	62	63.9	C	✓	4100	15	✓		3	✓	31.5	79 x 42 x 42	2
	Excelair EPA58043WB	999	238	55	47	62	63.1	C	✓	4300	15	✓		3	✓	42	81 x 45 x 43	2
	Goldair GCPAC12	749	195	55	47	62	62.4	C	✓	3530	ns	✓		2		28.5	73 x 41 x 35	1
	Goldair GCPAC200	459	114	55	47	62	59.4	C	✓	2060	ns			3		20.4	70 x 31 x 30	1
	Goldair GCPAC350W	849	195	55	47	62	62.4	RC	✓	3530	ns	✓	✓	2		28.5	73 x 41 x 35	1
	Olimpia Splendid Elite 12	899	194	55	47	62	63.9	C	✓	3500	11			2		27	69 x 42 x 36	3
	Rinnai RPC26MCWF	799	144	55	47	62	63.9	C	✓	2600	11–20	✓		3	✓	28.5	71 x 42 x 35	2
	TCL TAC-07CPB/RV	399	113	55	48	62	63.2	C	✓	2050	ns			2		22	67 x 32 x 32	3
	TCL TAC-12CPB/MZ	599	194	55	47	62	63.9	C	✓	3500	ns			2		27	69 x 42 x 36	3

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend portable air conditioners with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 70% or above. **Price** Recommended retail price as of October 2025. **Running cost** The approximate cost of operating the unit at maximum capacity for four hours per day for three months in hot weather, based on 40c/kWh. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of cooling performance (50%) and energy efficiency (50%). **Cooling score** based on a comparative analysis of the rated annualised energy efficiency ratio (AEER), which includes standby energy. **Energy efficiency score** we take the amount of power used and the amount of cooling energy produced as a measure of how well the product utilises energy to produce cooling. **Noise** results are comparative only and measured in dBA raw figures. What you actually hear depends on the environment. **Type C** Cooling only, **RC** Reverse-cycle. **ns** Not stated. All models in the table have cooling mode, fan-only mode and dry mode. All models in our table have castors and a timer. All are made in China, except the following DeLonghi units which are made in Italy: PAC EL112 CST WIFI, PAC EM82K, PAC EL110 ERF WIFI, PAC EM93K SILENT, PAC EX130 CST WIFI. ■



Front row seat

Looking for a TV that's great for watching sport?

Peter Zaluzny sorts the winners from the losers in our latest tests

If you're a cricket fan, nothing says Christmas holidays quite like flopping down on the couch with the air con cranking and the Boxing Day test on the TV. But if your old TV is close to retiring, you might be on the lookout for a new model that will do justice to your favourite sport.

This summer, whether you're watching the Sydney to Hobart race or a ballgame like cricket, tennis or basketball, choosing a TV that performs well when it comes to sport will make sure you get the most out of the season. But how do you know which models are MVPs and which should be left on the bench?

By checking CHOICE reviews, obviously. Televised sports display very differently to TV shows and movies, so our experts test TV models specifically for their performance for viewing sport. We talk you through the very best models at a range of price points so you

know which ones to put on your Christmas wishlist (or your Boxing Day sale list).

Best TVs for watching sport

In our extensive TV lab testing, our team of experts scores every model for sports in both standard definition (SD) and high definition (HD) as part of our picture quality assessment. We watch footage from an AFL game recorded from a live TV broadcast on consumer TVs and our reference monitor. This is from the same game broadcast on SD and HD channels. We are particularly looking for things like ball movement and whether the crowd looks like blobs or individual people. Our test mainly covers 65-inch TVs, as this is the most popular screen size in Australia.

But we still test one to two batches of small-screen TVs (26–47 inches) per year and some larger models. ▶

**Our test
mainly covers
65-inch TVs as
this is the most
popular screen size
in Australia**

BEST BUDGET TV FOR SPORTS



\$1295

75%

LG 65NANO80ASA

- **SD viewing score for sport:** 80%
- **HD viewing score for sport:** 85%
- **Screen size:** 65 inches

There aren't many TVs with sports quality results like these for less than \$1500. This model is a really solid option that doesn't break the bank, though it does have some minor shortcomings.

As far as sports go, it looks very good in SD and HD. Sound quality is among the best in this price category too – the roar of an enthusiastic crowd actually sounds decent and you won't be straining to hear the commentators.

Its HD strengths lie solely in sports, however. Movies and shows only look OK in high definition, and SD, while better, is at the lower end of good. That is fairly common amongst budget TVs, however, and 4K UHD is still very good.

**OLEDs
are typically
well regarded for
having deep blacks,
rich colours and
great contrast**

BEST MID-RANGE TV FOR SPORTS



\$2999

80%

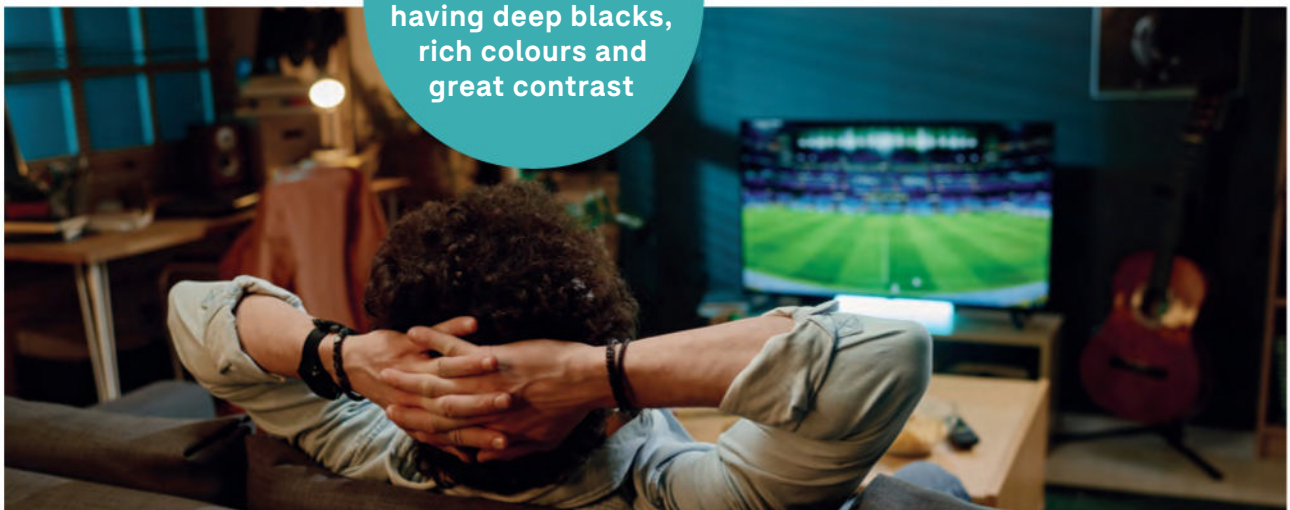
Hisense 65U8QA

- **SD viewing score for sport:** 85%
- **HD viewing score for sport:** 85%
- **Screen size:** 65 inches

This model is a clear winner for sports fans among the TVs we've tested in the mid-range price category. While there are others that earned similar results for sports performance, this TV is also a very good option for watching movies and shows.

Sound quality is pretty good too, particularly its presence, which can enhance the sense of audio filling the room. It may not capture the electricity of actually being in a stadium but this TV can definitely help things feel more exciting.

There is a slight viewing angle issue, which means picture quality can degrade a bit if you're sitting to the far left or right of the screen. So when the family comes around to watch the Boxing Day test, maybe just put the annoying cousins down that end of the room.



BEST PREMIUM TV FOR SPORTS



\$4299

82%

LG OLED65C5PSA

- **SD viewing score for sport:** 85%
- **HD viewing score for sport:** 90%
- **Screen size:** 65 inches

At \$4299, this is a premium OLED for the serious sports fans. That said, LG applies some generous discounts during sales periods like Black Friday – we’ve actually seen this model drop to around \$3000 before.

It’s among the top performing, currently available TVs in our test, especially for sports, with very good SD and excellent HD picture quality. It also did very well in our image quality tests for movies and shows, with sound quality that our experts described as having very good detail, warmth and balance.

OLEDs are typically well regarded for having deep blacks, rich colours and great contrast, which helps the picture ‘pop’, so to speak. So not only is this TV a great option for sports, it’s a very good all-rounder that should keep you entertained between matches.

Just bear in mind that OLED TVs don’t get quite as bright as backlit LCD TVs (QLED, MiniLED, Nanocell). The OLED65C5PSA should be suitable for daytime viewing in most rooms but you may have trouble seeing the screen if it’s placed outside or in a very well-lit space.



IMAGES: GETTY

SMALL-SCREEN ALTERNATIVE FOR SPORTS



\$399

71%

ChiQ L32G7PG

- **SD viewing score for sport:** 85%
- **HD viewing score for sport:** 80%
- **Screen size:** 32 inches

This 32-inch TV isn’t suitable for larger viewing areas but it will fit right in as a secondary screen for the bedroom, garage or BBQ area. With SD and HD sports broadcasts earning very good results, this TV is more than capable of getting the job done – and you can’t argue with the price if you’re working on a budget.

Just don’t expect to be wowed by its overall performance as HD picture quality is only OK. The SD picture is good though, so this may also be a winner if you’re really into old sitcoms.

Sound quality is poor, which is a common problem at this price point, and it doesn’t support 4K. But keep your expectations in check and you’ll still have a fun afternoon watching sport, even if the small screen can’t entirely immerse you. ▶



Should you use the 'sports' picture mode?

Most TVs include a 'sports' mode in the picture settings. This increases brightness and saturation so the visuals have more impact, but colours may not be entirely accurate. It can also activate motion smoothing depending on the brand and model.

Though film buffs rightfully recoil at the idea of motion smoothing, sports action like fast moving players or a ball flying across a field can be easier to view with this setting turned on. Just remember to turn it off when you flick over to movies or TV shows because these look awful in sports mode.

This setting isn't essential and whether it provides a better viewing experience will really depend on your personal preference. Give it a go and if it's not to your liking, switch over to another picture mode.

Note, we test all TVs in the default picture settings. This is usually 'standard' mode, not sports.

We test all TVs in the default picture settings. This is usually 'standard' mode, not sports



How to test a TV for sports instore

Retailers usually play content that makes the TVs look as good as possible. Sports broadcasts are a completely different ball game (pun intended), so switch to a match or race for a more real-world representation. If that's not possible, you could take in your own sports footage on a thumb drive or disc.

Evaluate key specs such as picture clarity (are the numbers on jerseys sharp?), motion, and colour balance (do skin tones look right?). Cycle through picture modes and note nasties such as judder (lack of smooth panning), motion blur (trailing elements behind fast-moving objects) artifacting and odd saturation.

The sound on store TVs is often muted, too, so turn the volume up if you can and study the sound. Is it rich or tinny? How do commentators' voices sound? If it's ordinary, you might need to buy an accompanying soundbar. See our soundbar reviews on page 62.

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING	BRAND	RATING
ChiQ	F	Samsung	C
Hisense	F	Sony	D
Hubbl	D	TCL	F
LG	D	Toshiba	F

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

				PERFORMANCE														SPECIFICATIONS								
Recommended	Best for sport		Price (\$)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	HD picture quality score (%)	SD picture quality score (%)	4K/UHD score (%)	Filmmaker mode score (%)	User interface score (%)	Remote control score (%)	Smart TV score (%)	Energy use score (%)	Electronic program guide score (%)	Sound quality score (%)	Voice assistant score (%)	Sport score (%)	Screen size (in)	OLED display	HDMI inputs	HDMI 2.1 support	USB 2 inputs (rear)	Record TV to USB	Weight with stand (kg)	Country of origin		
✓	✓	LG OLED65C5PSA	4299	82	83	84	85	85	93	65	88	79	80	75	84	88	65	✓	4	4	3	✓	18.5	Indonesia		
✓	✓	Sony K65XR80M2	5299	82	85	85	90	90	85	60	95	79	55	85	90	83	65	✓	4	2	1		24.2	Malaysia		
✓	✓	LG OLED65B5PSA	3299	81	78	81	90	90	93	65	88	79	80	65	84	90	65	✓	4	4	2	✓	17.3	Indonesia		
✓	✓	LG OLED65G5PSA	5299	81	83	75	90	90	93	65	88	77	80	70	84	83	65	✓	4	4	3	✓	26.6	Indonesia		
✓	✓	Hisense 65U8QAU	2999	80	86	79	85	90	92	58	78	72	70	75	82	85	65		3	0	1	✓	29.2	China		
✓	✓	Samsung QA65S95FAWXXY	5299	80	87	80	85	90	87	56	88	70	60	65	61	88	65	✓	4	4	3	✓	29	Vietnam		
✓		Sony XR65X90L	2199	79	74	82	85	85	87	60	93	71	80	70	82	78	65		4	4	1		25	Malaysia		
✓	✓	Sony K75XR90	5499	78	74	85	85	85	95	61	95	66	40	70	82	88	74		4	2	1		45	Malaysia		
	✓	LG 65QNED81ASA	1899	77	69	76	85	90	93	65	88	81	80	50	84	80	65		3	0	2	✓	26.3	Indonesia		
✓		LG 65QNED86ASA	2199	77	72	75	85	85	93	65	88	75	80	50	84	78	65		4	4	2	✓	26.3	Indonesia		
✓		LG 65QNED93ASA	2799	77	72	70	80	90	93	65	88	66	80	65	84	75	65		4	4	2	✓	19.8	China		
✓	✓	Sony K65XR50	2699	77	72	83	80	85	85	60	95	70	55	70	90	83	65		4	2	1		26.3	Malaysia		
✓	✓	Sony K65XR70	2999	77	77	83	85	85	85	60	95	67	40	70	92	83	65		4	2	1		28.3	Malaysia		
✓		Hisense 65U7QAU	2395	76	78	70	70	85	90	58	85	75	70	70	66	78	65		4	4	1	✓	20.7	China		
✓	✓	TCL 65A300W	2299	76	82	71	80	85	85	62	95	77	55	35	92	85	65		4	2	1		24.6	China		
	✓	Toshiba 65Z670RP	1695	76	68	78	75	80	92	61	95	77	70	70	74	80	65		4	2	1	✓	15.5	China		
✓	✓	Hisense 65S7NAU	2299	75	71	76	75	80	92	59	88	77	70	60	82	85	65		4	0	1	✓	29.9	China		
		Hisense 65U6QAU PRO	1899	75	64	73	80	85	92	62	95	76	70	65	74	75	65		4	2	1	✓	20.6	China		
	✓	Hubbl TVPFX065OCB	1595	75	68	78	80	80	87	66	78	90	60	75	49	80	65		3	2	0		35	Poland		
	✓	LG 65NANO80ASA	1295	75	63	72	80	85	93	65	88	76	80	75	84	83	65		3	0	2	✓	21.7	Indonesia		
✓	✓	Samsung QA65QN70FAWXXY	2199	75	74	75	75	80	87	56	85	72	60	80	61	80	64		4	4	2	✓	21.8	Vietnam		
	✓	TCL 65C7K	2295	75	70	67	80	90	83	68	95	73	55	75	90	80	65		4	2	1		19.9	China		
		Samsung QA55LS03DAWXXY	1799	74	72	66	75	85	93	55	88	68	70	60	61	78	54		4	4	2	✓	17.3	Vietnam		
	✓	Samsung QA65S90FAEXXY	4299	74	70	69	85	85	87	56	88	71	60	80	61	80	64	✓	4	4	2	✓	20.4	Vietnam		
	✓	Sony K65XR80	4299	74	69	78	80	85	73	61	95	76	40	80	90	80	65	✓	4	1	1		23.2	Malaysia		
		TCL 65C6K	1799	74	70	70	80	80	83	68	95	75	55	65	90	78	65		4	0	1	✓	17.2	China		
	✓	Blaupunkt BP500FTS	599	73	67	80	na	na	88	59	88	80	65	55	na	88	49		3	0	2		7.4	China		
		Samsung QA65LS03FWWXXY	3499	73	69	76	75	80	87	56	88	70	60	60	61	78	64		5	5	3	✓	22	Vietnam		
		Samsung UA65U8500FWXXY	1299	73	69	78	75	80	77	56	88	77	60	65	61	78	64		3	0	1		14.5	Vietnam		
		TCL 65P7K	1299	73	65	74	75	80	83	68	95	84	55	55	90	73	65		3	3	0		16	China		
	✓	ChiQ L32G7PG	399	71	63	75	na	nt	88	65	93	78	70	30	90	83	32		3	0	1	✓	4.2	China		

Recommended We recommend models with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 75% or more and at least 70% for SD and HD picture quality. **Price** RRP as of October 2025. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of HD picture quality (25%), SD picture quality (15%), filmmaker mode picture score (10%), user interface (10%), remote control (10%), smart TV (10%), 4K/UHD picture quality (5%), energy use (5%), EPG (electronic program guide) (5%) and sound quality (5%). **Best for sport** TVs earn a score of 80% or more in our sports viewing assessment. We look at how well the TV deals with standard definition (SD) and high definition (HD) broadcasts where we look at the players, ball movement and whether the crowd appears as individuals or large blobs. **Energy use score** is based on 10 hours in use and 14 hours in standby mode for 365 days at 40c per kWh. **Voice assistant score** is not included in the CHOICE Expert Rating and the Sport score is part of the HD and SD picture quality score. **na** not applicable. **nt** not tested. ■



Sizing up soundbars? **Alice Richard** and **Peter Zaluzny** help you find one to deliver excellent audio within your price range

For movie buffs and those who love to binge-watch TV, a full home theatre is the ideal. But these can be complicated, bulky and costly. A soundbar is a streamlined alternative and the next best thing. It can significantly enhance the sound that comes from your TV, without the big hit to your wallet.

Essentially, a soundbar is a slim box containing several speakers that sits just below your TV screen to enhance your audio experience. It may also include a subwoofer to deliver that extra punch or bass response that you'd expect to experience when watching movies with lots of action.

Don't assume that more money buys you better audio. Our experts were unimpressed by some expensive models, but blown away by others that come in around the \$400 mark.

Setting up your soundbar

Soundbars perform poorly in large open-plan areas but do well in smaller enclosed rooms where you sit no more than a few metres away from it.

Setting one up is quite straightforward. Just make sure

you have enough space in front of or below your TV screen (they're usually less than 15cm in height)

and that it's positioned approximately at head height relative to your ears when you're sitting on the lounge.

If yours comes with a subwoofer and it has a cable connection, make sure there's enough cable length to position it for best effect. Many subwoofers that come with soundbars are wireless, so you can place them anywhere in the room.

Soundbars do well in smaller enclosed rooms where you sit no more than a few metres away from it

Some of the latest models include spatial audio technologies such as Atmos and Dolby Audio where the sound can be bounced around the room to provide a 3D audio effect.

CONNECTIONS

To connect a DVD or Blu-ray player, check that the soundbar has at least one digital audio connection (either TOSLINK or Digital RCA) as well as stereo inputs. HDMI input is ideal. This connection will pass the video signal through the soundbar to the TV with just one cable. Some also have an AUX port to connect an audio player. A Bluetooth connection will make it easier to connect your phone or tablet to the soundbar (all models in our test support this), but you'll have to 'pair' them before this will work.

How we test soundbars

We use a panel of experts who have years of expertise testing audio equipment. They assess sound quality for film, music and spoken-word audio. We also take into account the ease of connecting and using the soundbar and remote, and how much energy the soundbar uses when in standby mode.

Our experts score each soundbar on these metrics to calculate the CHOICE Expert Rating, which is our overall score.



BEST BUDGET



75%
Hisense HS2100

\$249

If you're just looking for an affordable model to upgrade from your TV speakers, this is a great option. You may even be able to find

it for closer to \$200 during sales periods, making it one of the best deals going around. You only get stereo audio (2.1), which means you won't get the cinema-like surround sound effect, but it does include an external subwoofer,

which will sound much better than any bass coming from a TV speaker. The sub also links to the soundbar via a wireless connection. That gives you the freedom to place it in an ideal spot without having to run cables everywhere.

Features are otherwise pretty bare bones. There's no Wi-Fi support, for example, and it lacks lip sync adjustment, so there's a small chance that dialogue may not always match up with lip movements on screen. But it does have Bluetooth support, which allows you to stream music from another device without having to turn the TV on.

While there aren't many bells and whistles, this is a great-value soundbar that will no doubt deliver better sound than you get through your TV. ▶

They're best placed at around the same height as your ears when you're sitting on the couch



BEST MID-RANGE



85% Polk Signa S2

This just must be the best value-for-money soundbar we've ever tested. It scored a higher CHOICE Expert Rating than a number of soundbars costing three times as much. It doesn't support Dolby Atmos or DTS-X – it's limited to stereo surround with an external subwoofer (2.1). But the excellent audio quality makes up for this and delivers an experience well above its asking price. The sound was so good it almost broke its stereo bounds with an expansive feel that even added a sense of height – something normally limited to soundbars with Atmos or DTS-X capabilities. The panel was also impressed with the vocal clarity and excellent music quality.

At less than 6cm high, this is also a great soundbar for a TV that isn't wall-mounted, as there is no chance of it obstructing your view when placed in front of your TV on a table. There's no Wi-Fi, so it doesn't support music streaming services by itself. However, Bluetooth allows you to enjoy all your favourite music directly from your smartphone, tablet or laptop. An auxiliary port also means you can even plug in an audio player with a physical cable. Old school!

Sadly, its days may be numbered. Though you can still find the Signa S2 in the wild, availability isn't as widespread as it once was. If you want one, grab it as soon as possible, or consider the **Yamaha SR-B40A**, which is the next best model in the mid-range price bracket.

Shop Ethical rating

BRAND	RATING
Bose	D
Denon	C
Hisense	F
LG	D
Polk	C
Samsung	C
Sony	D
TCL	F
Yamaha	C

NOTE: Other brands in our review not mentioned here don't have a Shop Ethical rating. For more on Shop Ethical ratings and what they mean, see p73.

BEST PREMIUM



79% Polk MagniFi Max AX

The folks at Polk seem to know their way around a soundbar. Like the Signa S2, the MagniFi Max AX is a solid performer and it also comes with most of the fancy features you'd expect from a soundbar that costs over \$1000. Full surround sound is the big selling point here. It has 5.1.2 speaker channels, making this model one of those soundbars that sends sound towards your ears from every angle, without the need for extra speakers at the back of the room (with the right content). This is reflected in its excellent film audio performance and, though music performance is no slouch at 77%, it's really geared towards magnificent movie nights. But you can still stream music with ease via Bluetooth or Wi-Fi, which are built into the soundbar.

There are some shortcomings. The wall-mounting instructions lack detail, so you may need to resort to YouTube for guidance if you don't plan on placing it on a TV unit. Also, despite the complex collection of speakers, the MagniFi Max AX doesn't include automatic room calibration software. This means it can't measure the space and adjust settings to make things sound just right for your room. But it should still suit movie enthusiasts who can't justify the space, time or expense of a full-blown home theatre.

It's worth noting that Polk does sell a version of the Max AX that bundles in two rear speakers for legitimate surround sound. It costs an extra \$200 and, ironically, scored lower in the movie audio portion of our test.

If you're having trouble tracking down this model, give **LG S80TR** soundbar a go. It also costs \$1299 and earned similar results in our music and surround sound tests, though vocal clarity isn't quite as good.

Our expert panel assesses sound quality for film, music and spoken word audio



			PERFORMANCE								SPECIFICATIONS										
Recommended		Price (\$)	CHOICE Expert Rating (%)	Voice quality score (%)	Music quality score (%)	Multi-channel listening score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Remote score (%)	Standby energy score (%)	Wi-Fi	Automatic room calibration	Dolby Atmos	DTS-X	HDMI inputs	Multi-channel claim	Number of internal speakers	Soundbar dimensions (cm)	Soundbar weight (kg)	Subwoofer weight (kg)	Country of origin	
✓	Polk Signa S2	419	85	97	93	97	58	60	80					1	2.1	4	5.5 x 90 x 8.5	1.8	5.3	China	
✓	Yamaha SR-B40A	599	80	87	78	83	77	90	40			✓		1	ns	6	7 x 91 x 14	2.9	8.1	Vietnam	
✓	Polk MagniFi Max AX	1299	79	93	77	90	75	60	0	✓		✓	✓	3	5.1.2	11	7.5 x 114.5 x 12	5.9	11.8	China	
✓	LG Q Series S70TY	699	78	90	77	77	71	80	60			✓	✓	1	3.1.1	6	6.5 x 95 x 10.5	3	6	China	
✓	Polk MagniFi Max AX SR	1499	77	93	78	87	69	60	0	✓		✓	✓	3	7.1.2	11	7.5 x 114.5 x 12	5.9	11.8	China	
✓	Samsung HW-Q990F/XY	1999	77	83	85	90	64	70	0	✓	(A)	✓	✓	2	11.1.4	15	7.1 x 123.5 x 14	7.3	8.3	Vietnam	
✓	LG S40T	349	76	73	73	83	72	80	60					0	2.1	2	6.5 x 72 x 6.5	2	4.5	China	
✓	LG S95TR	1699	76	83	83	83	70	80	0	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	9.1.5	8	6.5 x 125 x 13.5	6	10	China	
✓	Hisense HS2100	249	75	80	73	80	68	60	80				✓	1	2.1	2	6.5 x 80.5 x 9.5	1.5	3.4	China	
✓	LG S80TR	1299	75	77	75	90	69	80	0	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	5.1.3	6	6.5 x 100 x 13.5	4.3	10	China	
	Bose Smart Ultra Soundbar White	1499	74	87	68	77	73	80	20	✓	✓	✓		1	ns	9	6 x 105 x 11	5.8	na	Malaysia	
	Denon DHT-S316	499	74	85	83	73	65	30	80					1	ns	ns	5.5 x 90 x 8.5	1.8	5.2	China	
	LG SH7Q	799	74	73	68	83	76	80	40				✓	1	5.1	5	10.5 x 120.5 x 15	8.6	5.3	China	
	Yamaha True X Bar 50A with External Subwoofer	999	74	77	73	83	77	70	0	✓		✓		1	ns	6	6.5 x 101.5 x 11	4	10	China	
	Sony Bravia Theatre Bar 8	1499	73	83	82	77	60	80	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	5.0.2	11	6.5 x 110 x 10.5	5	na	Malaysia	
	Sony Bravia Theatre Bar 9	1499	73	83	83	77	60	80	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	7.0.2	13	6.5 x 130 x 10.5	5.5	na	Malaysia	
	Yamaha True X System	1199	73	77	73	83	73	70	0	✓		✓		1	ns	6	6.5 x 101.5 x 11	4	10	China	
	Samsung HW-C450	249	72	80	77	80	70	50	0				✓	0	2.1	2	6 x 86 x 8	1.4	4.5	China	
	Samsung HW-Q600C	795	72	80	80	80	69	50	0			✓	✓	1	3.1.2	8	6 X 103 x 11	3.8	5.5	Vietnam	
	Bose Solo Soundbar 2	399	71	77	72	70	58	80	100					0	na	2	7.5 x 55 x 9	1.7	na	Thailand	
	Denon Home Sound Bar 550	999	71	90	80	80	61	40	0	✓		✓	✓	1	4	6	7.5 x 65 x 12	3.3	na	Vietnam	
	Hisense AX5120G	599	71	70	70	83	63	50	60			✓	✓	1	5.1.2	5	6.5 x 92 x 9	3	5	China	
	Samsung HW-QS700F/XY	999	71	87	75	77	58	70	0	✓	(A)	✓		1	3.1.2	7	5.5 x 116 x 12	4.4	4.8	Vietnam	
	Samsung S61D S-Series	599	71	73	73	80	67	80	0	✓	✓	✓	✓	0	5	7	6.5 x 67 x 10.5	3	na	Vietnam	
	Sony HT-S400	449	71	77	72	80	67	60	20	✓	✓	✓		1	2.1	2	6.5 x 90 x 9	2.4	7.3	China	
	TCL C935U	999	71	73	68	80	76	80	0	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	5.1.2	5	7 x 105.5 x 12.5	4.1	7.8	China	
	Yamaha SR-C30A	399	71	77	72	77	69	50	40					1	ns	2	6.5 x 60 x 9.5	1.3	5.5	Vietnam	
	Denon DHT-S517	749	70	70	83	77	56	50	20			✓		2	3.1.2	7	6 x 105 x 9.5	2.5	4.3	China	
	Sony Bravia Theatre System 6 (HTS60)	999	70	80	78	80	48	80	20			✓	✓	0	5.1	5	6.5 x 91 x 9	2.6	11.6	Vietnam	

TABLE NOTES Recommended We recommend soundbars with a CHOICE Expert Rating of 75% and above. **Price** Suggested by manufacturers as of October 2025. **CHOICE Expert Rating** is made up of music quality (30%), multichannel sound quality (30%), ease of use (20%), voice quality (10%), remote control (5%) and standby energy (5%). **Standby energy score** A score of 0% means the soundbar pulls more than 2W of power in standby. Models with Wi-Fi tend to score lower as they are continually on the wireless network. Turning off Wi-Fi should improve the standby energy performance. **(A)** SpaceFit Sound Pro only works with supported Samsung TV. **na** Not applicable. **ns** Not stated. All models in the table support Bluetooth for audio playback using a smart device, and all have ARC support using an HDMI connection except the Bose Solo Soundbar 2 and Samsung HW-C450. All come with a wall mount except the LG S40T. ■

Perfect match?

Does your TV and soundbar need to be the same brand? Not necessarily, but **Peter Zaluzny** looks at why you might want to keep them in the same ecosystem

TV picture quality may have improved over the years, but the built-in speakers still leave a lot to be desired.

Even the best sounding models still can't match a good soundbar. You'll hear improvements in depth (bass), vocal clarity, warmth and a sense of room-filling expansiveness in all but the worst performing soundbars in our test.

The major TV manufacturers also make soundbars – LG, Samsung, Sony, Hisense and TCL. Sometimes their advertising suggests that you need to buy both products from the same brand to get the best experience, but this isn't true. If the TV can connect to your soundbar, then you are going to hear sound, it's as simple as that. Almost all soundbars can connect via a physical cable.

However, there are some special features you might have access to if you keep things in the family. Enhanced audio is usually the big selling point, but there are ease of use improvements as well.

There are some special features you might have access to if you keep things in the family

Why match brands?

SPECIAL SURROUND SOUND

LG, Samsung, Sony, TCL and Hisense allow you to unlock special sound settings when you pair their TVs and soundbars. Each follow the same basic idea – instead of only sending audio to the soundbar or TV speakers, these pairings combine the soundbar and TV into a larger speaker array.

It's a little tricky to explain but it's best to think of it in terms of the total number of speakers. Let's say your soundbar has 10 speakers and the TV has two. If you turn the TV speakers and soundbar on at the same time, they would simply play the same audio signal (such as the sound from a movie) at the same time. The 10 speakers in the soundbar and two in the TV operate independently of one another in this case.

But the special settings that you can only access by pairing supported soundbars and TVs within the same brand essentially integrate the TV speakers into the soundbar. The 10 soundbar speakers and two TV speakers work

NEED TO KNOW

- TVs and soundbars don't need to be from the same brand to work with each other.
- You can access a few exclusive features by using products from the same brand.
- A few manufacturers offer bundle discounts if you buy a soundbar and TV at the same time.

together to play audio from a total of 12 speakers.

How are they different? Humans hear sounds across a range of frequencies, which are commonly referred to as bass, mid-range and highs (or treble) in home entertainment products. When the soundbar and TV are working as a cohesive unit, certain frequencies are sent out via TV speakers while the rest go to the soundbar (and subwoofer if you have one).

This aim is to deliver a more expansive, spacious, immersive sound that feels like it's filling the room, closer to what you'd expect from a home cinema. Whether it actually works like that in practice is still debatable because, like most things audio, good sound quality is subjective.

You can find TVs and soundbars that support these features on their websites or by reading the product specifications. Brand names and links to compatible TVs and soundbars are:

- LG WOW Orchestra
- Samsung Q-Symphony
- Sony Acoustic Centre Sync/S-Centre speaker mode
- Hisense Hi Concerto
- TCL Tutti Choral (ask for details instore).

WIRE-FREE CONNECTIVITY

Removing cable clutter is another bonus feature. You can usually pair a TV and soundbar via Bluetooth, regardless of brands. But Wi-Fi connectivity does require using a soundbar and TV from the same brand.

So why bother with Wi-Fi when you can just use Bluetooth? Bandwidth.

Bluetooth doesn't have anywhere near as much data capacity as Wi-Fi. As a result, it often reduces audio quality and is typically limited to stereo audio (left and right speakers). This means a surround-sound-capable soundbar will default to stereo if you use a Bluetooth connection. Essentially, you won't be able to use all the features you paid for.

Wi-Fi, on the other hand, has plenty of bandwidth. LG claims that its products support up to 10 surround sound channels (7.1.2) via Wi-Fi connection. This also allows you to place additional speakers around the room without any cable clutter.

At the time of writing, Sony, Hisense and TCL soundbars and TVs do not support Wi-Fi pairing.

EASE OF USE

Though soundbars aren't too tricky to get your head around, manufacturers mostly make sure that their products

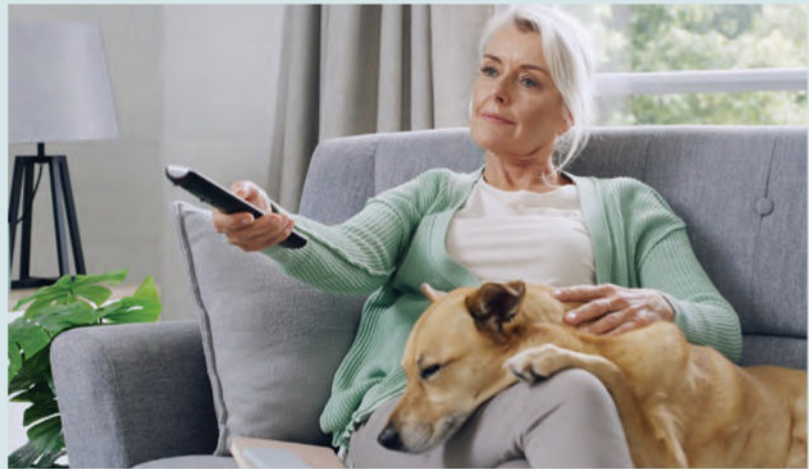
Don't be misled on single remote control

Some TV and soundbar manufacturers might have you believe that you need to pair their products to control both with the same remote. This is misleading, because all they've done is re-badge a feature that works across all brands.

Consumer Electronics Control – or CEC for short – is a widely available feature that lets you control supported devices with one remote. It also automatically turns on/off connected devices when prompted – for example, if you switch on your TV then flick over to the PS5 input, CEC will turn on your PS5 as well.

All the major manufacturers have adopted CEC and included it with pretty much all TVs, soundbars, receivers and games consoles released in the last few years. However, some brands advertise it under a different name. LG calls it Simplink; Samsung has Anynet+; Sony has Bravia Sync/Bravia Link or Control for HDMI; and TCL offers 'Control other devices'.

These special names may imply that these functions only work if the TV and soundbar brands are the same, but that's not true. They're just CEC rebranded, which means a Simplink-enabled LG TV will activate the CEC functions in an Anynet+ supported Samsung soundbar. Rather than rebrand, Hisense has stuck with CEC.



play nice with one another. For example, they can often detect that you've plugged one of their soundbars into one of their TVs and will streamline the set-up process accordingly.

You may also be able to access the soundbar settings on your TV screen. This is much easier than using an app or the tiny monitors built into some soundbars.

AESTHETICS

Manufacturers usually follow a fairly consistent design across their home entertainment products. For many, the TV is a central feature of the

loungeroom, so you may want to buy the same brand of soundbar to match the look and feel of your room.

SAVING MONEY

It's not uncommon for manufacturers to bundle their TVs and soundbars to sell at a discount, especially during common sales periods. Just bear in mind that while these products are from the same brand, they may not offer the pairing advantages outlined above (such as enhanced audio or Wi-Fi connectivity). Double check the specifications before buying if you want these features as well. ■



The best brands of 2025

These are the brands that impressed in our labs and in your homes

Shopping for appliances shouldn't feel like a guessing game. If your dryer has spun its last load or your fridge is frazzled beyond repair and you're in the market for a new one, cutting through all the product promises and marketing spin can feel like a minefield.

Perhaps you've already started your research – maybe asked a couple of friends which brand they own, headed instore or online to browse the latest offers, or (ideally) checked in with the independent CHOICE expert reviews to find out which appliances came out on top in our latest testing. So far, well done!

But all this research can only tell a part of the story. This is because all the sales advice and lab tests in the world still can't take into account the real-world experience of how well an appliance actually works or how reliable it is. It's the kind of

information that only an owner can gather after years of hands-on time with particular products and brands.

That's where CHOICE Best Brand can help.

How we decide which brands are best

Every year, we survey thousands of CHOICE members about the products they've bought in the past few years. Our product reliability and customer satisfaction surveys tell us which brands offer products that are likely to last the distance while also giving good service to customers. We gather this data and then analyse it along with the results of our expert testing to reveal the brands that are truly delivering on satisfaction, reliability and quality.

For a brand to be eligible for Best Brand, they have to meet some strict criteria. To be considered, we must have tested a minimum of five models in our labs, and a brand must have received a minimum of 50 responses to the CHOICE member survey. Additionally, brands must score a minimum of 60% and be above

the average score for testing, reliability and satisfaction for consideration. (This is why on the following pages you won't see all the brands we test – we mostly include results for only those that are eligible for Best Brand, though in some categories we include some other household names for comparison.)

Remember, though, no brand is ever perfect. Years of expert testing in our labs has shown us that you should

For a brand to be eligible for Best Brand, they have to meet some strict criteria

never buy a product based on the brand alone, because we've seen countless examples of products from the same brand that vary quite significantly in performance. Equally, we know that paying more for a premium brand doesn't always, well, pay off. So don't assume that one brand's products are the best across the many different features, functions and price points. That's where the rest of your research comes in.

FRIDGES

CHOICE Best Brand: Mitsubishi Electric

The accredited fridge lab in CHOICE headquarters has tested almost 400 fridges in the last seven years. In that time, the Best Brand crown has been shared between three brands: Fisher & Paykel, LG and Mitsubishi Electric.

This year, our Best Brand award goes again to Mitsubishi Electric, indicating that fridges from this brand are likely to perform well, hold up well over time, and you'll be happy with the customer service.

LG came in second place, followed by Samsung, then Fisher & Paykel and Westinghouse. Electrolux had the highest average test score, but wasn't in the running for Best Brand because it had lower than average customer satisfaction. Others also were excluded from Best Brand eligibility for having lower than average test, reliability or satisfaction scores.

To find out which specific fridge models we recommend, turn to page 48.

	BEST BRAND SCORE (%)	AVERAGE TEST SCORE (%)	RELIABILITY SCORE (%)	SATISFACTION SCORE (%)
Mitsubishi Electric	78	73	89	90
LG	75	73	81	86
Samsung	74	71	82	87
Fisher & Paykel	71	68	84	86
Westinghouse	71	67	83	88



IMAGES: GETTY | WEBER



BBQS

CHOICE Best Brand: Weber

Weber is like the popular, good-looking kid who is annoyingly good at sports and tops all their tests – the brand has taken out our Best Brand title this year for the seventh year running, with a 14 percentage point jump on the next-closest brand in our analysis, Ziegler & Brown.

Our experts have tested over 80 barbecues in our labs over the past nine years from all major brands including Beefeater, Everdure by Heston Blumenthal, Gasmate, Jumbuck, Masport, Weber and Ziegler & Brown. Weber is the only brand, however, that meets our strict criteria to qualify for Best Brand – the others had below average test scores, or below average reliability and satisfaction results in our survey of CHOICE members who actually own these barbecues.

CHOICE testing expert Fiona Mair says: "Weber barbecues are relatively expensive but in our testing we generally find you get what you pay for – they are solid with a quality build and they have mastered the distance of the burner to the cooking plate, allowing for better control of the temperature and minimising flare-ups. I also find them much easier to clean than some other barbecues, as they mostly have good access to the drip tray."

To find out which models we recommend, look out for our barbecues review in the February issue. ▶

	BEST BRAND SCORE (%)	AVERAGE TEST SCORE (%)	RELIABILITY SCORE (%)	SATISFACTION SCORE (%)
Weber	86	82	88	90
Ziegler & Brown	72	71	88	85
Beefeater	71	72	87	82
Matador	71	69	90	80
Jumbuck	65	65	82	74

STICK VACUUMS

CHOICE Best Brand: LG

Don't be a sucker for brands that overpromise and under-deliver. When it comes to finding the perfect vacuum that's going to blow you away with its long-term performance, our data doesn't lie.

For the second year running, LG is the best stick vac brand, with a Best Brand score of 78%, in addition to being a reliable brand with highly satisfied customers. Slightly behind LG with a Best Brand score of 74% is Dyson.

CHOICE vacuum expert Adrian Lini has cleaned carpets (and more) with over 150 stick vacuums since 2019 so he knows a thing or two about how these brands measure up.

"Dyson and LG stick vacuums both tend to perform well in our tests," says Lini. "Of course this does vary from model to model, but they're both great brands that often deliver good performance."

"You're unlikely to be disappointed with either an LG or a Dyson stick vac, especially if you do your research and check our reviews to find the best performing model for your needs."

To find out which specific stick vacuum models we recommend, see *CHOICE* Oct 25.

	BEST BRAND SCORE (%)	AVERAGE TEST SCORE (%)	RELIABILITY SCORE (%)	SATISFACTION SCORE (%)
LG	78	81	68	81
Dyson	74	81	65	81
Bosch	69	77	64	79
Electrolux	69	73	76	79
Vax	64	76	60	69



DISHWASHERS

CHOICE Best Brand: Miele

Shopping for a new dishwasher? Let's make your research a little easier. The CHOICE Best Brand for dishwashers in 2025 is Miele, setting a high standard for sparkling dishes and long-term reliability.

Our experts have tested more than 170 dishwashers over the past five years in the CHOICE labs. We've dished the dirt on those that give consistently good results – and which are total wash-outs.

Miele dishwashers have performed consistently well over the past five years, achieving the highest average CHOICE Expert Rating in our lab tests, as well as the highest satisfaction scores of any dishwasher brand.

Bosch also performed well, coming in second place. All other dishwasher brands were ineligible as they failed to meet one or more of our strict Best Brand criteria.

Remember though, buying an appliance based solely on the brand can be a fool's errand – remember to check our latest dishwasher review in *CHOICE* Sep 25 to ensure you don't get a dud.

	BEST BRAND SCORE (%)	AVERAGE TEST SCORE (%)	RELIABILITY SCORE (%)	SATISFACTION SCORE (%)
Miele	87	83	88	93
Bosch	79	79	90	90

OVENS

CHOICE Best Brand: Westinghouse

Looking for a wall oven that won't let you down halfway through a Sunday roast? The CHOICE Best Brand awards have done the hard work for you, crunching the data on performance, reliability and owner satisfaction to reveal the standout oven brand for 2025: Westinghouse.

This is the first time in seven years Westinghouse has managed to topple Miele from the top spot in our Best Brand category, with strong performance scores in our lab testing in addition to being a reliable brand with highly satisfied customers. While Miele ovens scored slightly higher on average in our testing, the brand received a below-average score on reliability. Fisher & Paykel also performed quite well but had a below-average customer satisfaction score.

To find out which specific wall oven models we recommend, see *CHOICE* Nov 25.



	BEST BRAND SCORE (%)	AVERAGE TEST SCORE (%)	RELIABILITY SCORE (%)	SATISFACTION SCORE (%)
Miele	78	83	78	85
Fisher & Paykel	77	80	86	79
Westinghouse	77	81	84	81
Electrolux	76	80	79	80
Bosch	74	81	72	84
Smeg	71	77	78	82



IMAGES: GETTY

BEST BRANDS



CLOTHES DRYERS

CHOICE Best Brand: LG

If you're in a spin trying to figure out which dryer to buy, our years of testing data combined with the results of our reliability and satisfaction surveys on clothes dryers can help clear the air. This year, LG took out our title of Best Brand for clothes dryers, achieving an impressive average test score of 87% in our reviews along with higher than average scores for reliability and satisfaction when we surveyed our members who own LG dryers.

Electrolux and Westinghouse also delivered a product range that scored high enough to be contenders. Although their overall test performance wasn't as good as LG's, these brands did perform well in our latest reliability and customer satisfaction survey. However, we weren't able to test enough models for the brands to be eligible for Best Brand status.

There were other brands that performed well in our testing but either didn't have enough models tested or enough reader responses in our most recent survey. This is why it's worth looking at various brands in your research, and don't assume that one brand's products are the best across the many different features, functions and price points. The performance of individual models from the same brand can vary considerably. The best way to choose is to look at the recommended models in our latest clothes dryer review, *CHOICE* Oct 25. ■

	BEST BRAND SCORE (%)	AVERAGE TEST SCORE (%)	RELIABILITY SCORE (%)	SATISFACTION SCORE (%)
Electrolux	86	79	92	85
LG	86	87	93	87
Westinghouse	86	75	97	86
Miele	81	80	85	91
Fisher & Paykel	73	77	85	84
Bosch	69	68	85	83

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* Indicates a correction or clarification (see Checkout).

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Laptops	Feb, May, Sep
Printers	Jun
Ray-Ban Meta Glasses	Apr
School tech guide	Feb
SIM swap scams	Jul
Smartphones	Aug
Soundbars	Dec/Jan
Speakers, wireless	Aug
Starlink satellite internet	Oct
TVs	May, Sep, Dec/Jan

INSURANCE & MONEY

Bank closures, the last bank in Yarram	Dec/Jan
Businesses refusing cash	Nov
Car insurance	
seniors and young drivers	Feb
comprehensive	Nov
CTP	Oct, Dec/Jan*
Cash access in remote NT town	Jul
Cost saving that doesn't work	Apr
Health insurance	Mar
for adult children	Jun
for tax purposes	Aug
price hikes	Apr
Home & contents insurance	Jul

Home insurance calculators	Jun
Legal assistance funding	Apr
Pet insurance	Feb
Rent bidding	Oct
Save on buying appliances	Oct
Superannuation	
poor financial advice	Sep
insurance in super	Jun
minimum balances	Mar, Dec/Jan
savings targets	Mar

CONSUMERS & DATA

AI therapy apps	Apr
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BABIES & KIDS

Baby monitors	Feb
Cot mattresses	Nov
Cots	Nov
High chairs	Apr, Jun*
Labubus, counterfeit risks	Nov
Portable cots	May
Strollers	Jun
double	Aug
Trampolines	Nov

TRAVEL

Luggage	Oct
Travel insurance	Dec/Jan
pre-existing conditions	May

OUTDOOR

Barbecues	Feb*
Hedge trimmers	Feb
Leaf blowers	Jul
Pet monitors	Feb
Robot lawnmowers	Mar
Sun shelters	Dec/Jan

HOME IMPROVEMENT

Heat pump hot water systems	May
Smart locks	Mar
Solar batteries	Dec/Jan
Solar subsidies	Sep

FOOD & DRINK

Hot cross buns	Apr
Milk chocolate	Sep

Stocks and broths	Oct
Vanilla ice cream	Dec/Jan

HEALTH & BODY

Fitness trackers	Mar
Retirement villages	Mar
Sunscreens	Aug, Sep*
Tanning nasal sprays	May

SHOPPING

AI product recommendations	Feb
Best Brands 2025	Dec/Jan
B Corp certification	Aug
Chocolate, ethical	Jun
Confusing pharmacy specials	Jul
Counterfeit medical devices	May
Disaster scams	Aug
Energy retailers and confusing billing	Aug
First Nations consumer champion Lynda Edwards	Jul
Ghost stores	Sep
Grocery shopping	
grocery prices in prison	Sep
remote grocery prices	Feb
Mental health apps, ads	Oct
Modern slavery	Oct
Moving house, guide	Mar
MyConnect, utilities connection	Jun
Price tracking tools	May
Second-hand clothes	Sep
Shonky Awards 2025	Nov
Smart meters rollout	Mar
Soft plastics recycling	Mar
Unit pricing	Nov
Electric bikes	Jul
Electric vehicles	Apr
Uber dominating market	May

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A	Praises, no criticism
B	Some praise, no criticism
C	Praises, some criticism
D	Criticism, some praise
F	Criticisms



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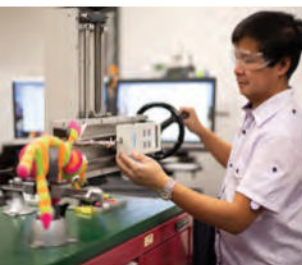
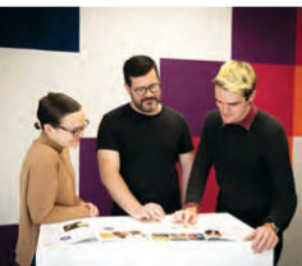
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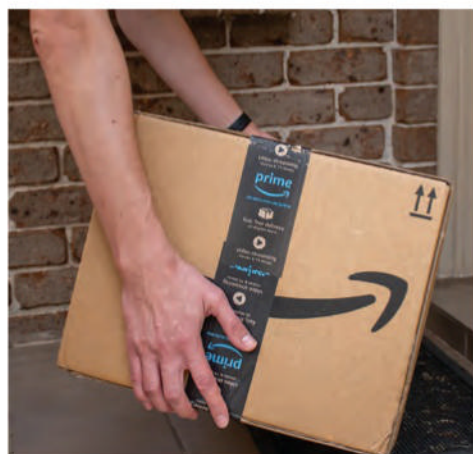
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BBQs, pizza ovens
and outdoor kitchens



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The struggles faced by
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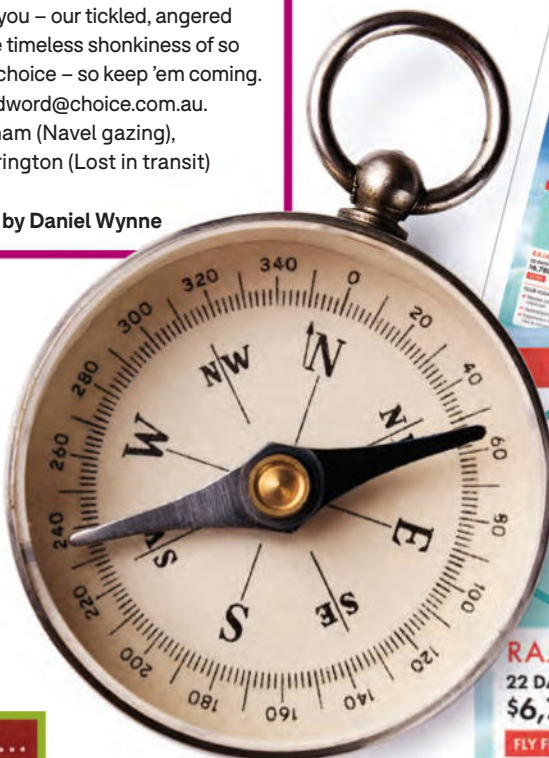
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This month, thanks go to Gary Billingham (Navel gazing), Herma Buttner (Serrano-no), Cheryl Ferrington (Lost in transit) and Don Tadixz (Nought on offer).

Compiled by Daniel Wynne

SERRANO-NO

If it's made the Italian way, wouldn't it be prosciutto?



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